ARGOSY

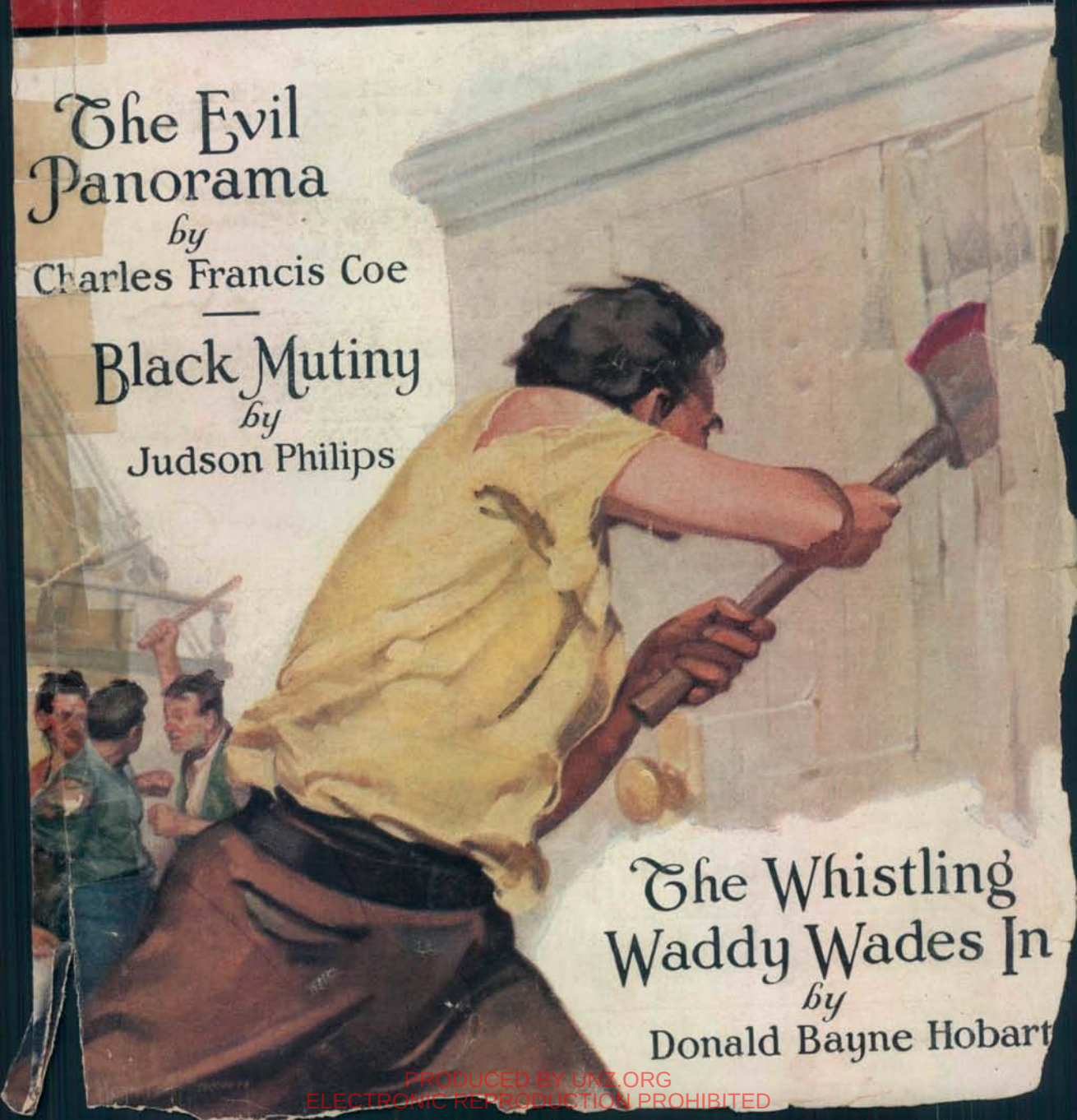
ALL-STORY WEEKLY

JAN. 14

PRICE 10¢

The Evil Panorama
by
Charles Francis Coe

Black Mutiny
by
Judson Philips



The Whistling Waddy Wades In
by
Donald Bayne Hobart

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Classified Advertising

The Purpose of this Department is to put the reader in touch immediately with the newest needfuls for the home, office, farm, or person; to offer, or seek, an unusual business opportunity, or to suggest a service that may be performed satisfactorily through correspondence. It will pay a housewife or business man equally well to read these advertisements carefully.

Classified Advertising Rate in The Munsey Combination comprising:

Munsey's Magazine -
Argosy-Allstory W'kly
Flynn's Weekly - -
Minimum space 4 lines.

Combination Line Rate $3.00 less 2% cash discount

Feb. 18th Argosy-Allstory Weekly Forms Close Jan. 21st

AGENTS & SALESMEN WANTED

$45 TO $75 WEEKLY IN SPARE TIME—NO MATTER WHAT YOU ARE NOW DOING, JUST SHOW "CHIEFTAIN" SHIRT SAMPLES AND STYLE BOOK. Write orders. We deliver and collect. YOUR PAY DAILY. Complete Outfit Free. CINCINNATI SHIRT CO., Shop 1761, Cincinnati, Ohio.

No high-pressure salesmanship necessary selling LUMINATE, our Magic Electric WINDOW and OUTDOOR Salesman. Demand established. Color, light, motion gets 'em. Greatest quick-change letter system and snappy two-color posters land orders on demonstration. Hustlers collecting $100 weekly easy. Protected territory. DISPLAY PRODUCTS CO., M407-9 East 31st St., Kansas City, Mo.

WE START YOU WITHOUT A DOLLAR, SOAPS, EXTRACTS, PERFUMES, TOILET GOODS, EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. CARNATION CO., DEPT. 1040, ST. LOUIS, MO.

Agents make larger profits selling well known Ho-Ro-Co Soaps, Perfumes, Toilet Articles. Our lower prices give larger profits. Over 50,000 cans La-Em-Strait Hair Dressing sold last year. HO-RO-CO, 2702 Ho-Ro-Co Bldg., St. Louis, Mo.

GET OUR FREE SAMPLE CASE—TOILET ARTICLES, PERFUMES AND SPECIALTIES. Wonderfully profitable. LA DERMA CO., Dept. D, St. Louis, Mo.

MAKE $45 TO $100 WEEKLY—full or part time—and liberal bonus, selling BETTER QUALITY all-wool made-to-measure suits and overcoats. Save $18.50 per suit. No experience necessary. Commissions paid in advance. We furnish handsome large swatch samples and complete instructions FREE. Write today! W. Z. GIBSON, 500 Throop St., Dept. N-409, Chicago.

TAILORING SALESMEN: Sell Simpson's new $23.50 pure virgin-wool suits, topcoats; commissions in advance; exclusive territory; big outfit 175 samples FREE. J. B. SIMPSON, 843 Adams St., Dept. 1451, Chicago.

DO YOU WANT AGENTS AND SALESMEN TO SELL your merchandise? Men and women who are educated in personal salesmanship and know the house-to-house, office, and store canvassing proposition. These advertisers are getting them year in and year out, and there are thousands more for you among the readers of the Munsey Magazines. Our Classified Service Bureau will gladly show you how to use this section most profitably and at the least cost. Write to-day to the Classified Manager, Munsey Combination, 280 B'way, New York.

AUTHORS—MANUSCRIPTS

WRITE THE WORDS FOR A SONG. WE COMPOSE MUSIC. OUR COMPOSER WROTE MANY SONG HITS. MONARCH MUSIC COMPANY, 236 WEST 55TH ST. (NEAR BROADWAY), DEPT. 109, NEW YORK.

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

WORLD FAMOUS WORKS OF JACK LONDON. TWELVE PRICELESS VOLUMES AT A BARGAIN. SEND FOR FREE CIRCULAR. McKINLAY, STONE & MACKENZIE, 114 EAST 16TH ST., NEW YORK. DEPT. "A."

MICHIGAN FARM LANDS FOR SALE

MONEY MADE IN MICHIGAN POTATOES. $10 DOWN NOW AND EASY TERMS BUYS LAND NEAR MARKETS, Lakes, Streams. Write today. SWIGART & CO., M-1276, First National Bank Building, Chicago.

TOBACCO

TOBACCO HABIT BANISHED. NO MATTER HOW LONG YOU HAVE BEEN A VICTIM, no matter how strong your craving, no matter in what form you use tobacco, there is help for you. Just send postcard or letter for our Free Book. It explains everything. NEWELL PHARMACAL CO., Dept. 812-A, Clayton Station, St. Louis, Mo.

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EARN $120 TO $250 MONTHLY, EXPENSES PAID, AS RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR. WE SECURE POSITION FOR YOU AFTER COMPLETION OF 3 MONTHS' HOME STUDY COURSE OR MONEY REFUNDED; EXCELLENT OPPORTUNITIES. WRITE FOR FREE BOOKLET CM-30. STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INST., BUFFALO, N. Y.

Become a Landscape Architect. Uncrowded profession; wonderful opportunity for money-making. Easily mastered by mail. Earn while you learn. Est. 1916. Write for details. AMERICAN LANDSCAPE SCHOOL, 63 Newark, N. Y.

MEN—EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY; travel; make secret investigations; reports; salaries; expenses. Write AMERICAN FOREIGN DETECTIVE AGENCY, 320, St. Louis, Mo.

MEN WANTING OUTDOOR WORK, qualify for Forest Ranger Position. Start $125 month; cabin and vacation; patrol the forests; protect the game; give tourists information. Write MOKANE INSTITUTE, M-12, Denver, Colo.

U. S. Government Jobs. $1140-$3300 year. Men-women, 18 up. Steady work. Vacation. Common education sufficient. Experience unnecessary. Full particulars FREE. Write immediately—today sure. Franklin Institute, Dept. T-1, Rochester, N. Y.

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EARN MONEY AT HOME. FULL OR SPARE TIME. OIL PAINT PHOTOS. NEW METHOD. EASILY MASTERED. HIGHLY PROFITABLE. Oil Paint Outfit Free. Steady employment. Write for Free Book. PICTORIAL ART STUDIOS, INC., 2926 Broadway, Dept. B.M., Chicago.

HELP WANTED—FEMALE

$6—$18 A DOZEN DECORATING PILLOW TOPS AT HOME. EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. PARTICULARS FOR STAMP. TAPESTRY PAINT CO., 128, LAGRANGE, IND.

ADDRESS ENVELOPES AT HOME—SPARE TIME. EXPERIENCE UNNECESSARY. $15-$25 WEEKLY EASY. PARTICULARS FREE. SEND STAMPED ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. MAZELLE, DEPT. A, GARY, INDIANA.

EDUCATIONAL

YOU read these little advertisements. Perhaps you obtain through them things you want; things you might never have known about if you had not looked here. Did it ever strike you other people would read your message—that they would buy what you have to sell; whether it is a bicycle you no longer need, a patented novelty you desire to push, or maybe your own services? Our Classified Service Bureau will gladly show you how to use this section most profitably and at the least cost. Write to-day to the Classified Manager, Munsey Combination, 280 Broadway, New York.

SONG WRITERS

TWENTY PRACTICAL POINTS as a guide to the writing of SALABLE popular songs. Clear, complete, and valuable. Send fifty cents in coin to NATIONAL SONG-WRITERS' SERVICE, P. O. Box 649, Cleveland, Ohio.

PATENT ATTORNEYS

INVENTORS—Write for our guide book, "How to Get Your Patent," and evidence of invention blank. Send model or sketch for inspection and Instructions Free. Terms reasonable. RANDOLPH & CO., Dept. 412, Washington, D. C.

PATENTS—Write for our free Guide Book, "How To Obtain A Patent" and Record of Invention Blank. Send model or sketch and description of Invention for Inspection and Advice Free. Reasonable Terms. Prompt Service. Highest References. VICTOR J. EVANS & CO., 762 Ninth, Washington, D. C.

PATENTS, BOOKLET FREE. HIGHEST REFERENCES. BEST RESULTS. PROMPTNESS ASSURED. SEND DRAWING OR MODEL FOR EXAMINATION AND ADVICE. WATSON E. COLEMAN, REGISTERED PATENT LAWYER, 724 NINTH STREET, WASHINGTON, D. C.

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If You Were Dying To-night

and I offered you something that would give you ten years more to live, would you take it? You'd grab it. Well, fellows, I've got it, but don't wait till you're dying or it won't do you a bit of good. It will then be too late. Right now is the time. Tomorrow or any day, some disease will get you and if you have not equipped yourself to fight it off, you're gone. I don't claim to cure disease. I am not a medical doctor, but I'll put you in such condition that the doctor will starve to death waiting for you to take sick. Can you imagine a mosquito trying to bite a brick wall? A fine chance.

A Re-Built Man

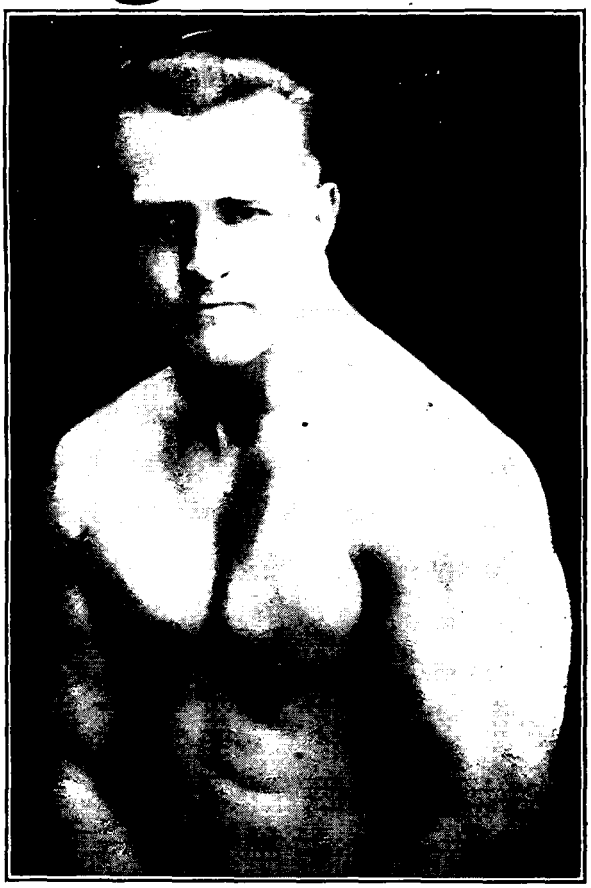
I like to get the weak ones. I delight in getting hold of a man who has been turned down as hopeless by others. It's easy enough to finish a task that's more than half done. But give me the weak, sickly chap and watch him grow stronger. That's what I like. *It's fun to me because I know I can* do it and I like to give the other fellow the laugh. I don't just give you a veneer of muscle that looks good to others. I work on you both inside and out. *I not only put big, massive arms* and legs on you, but I build up those inner muscles that surround your vital organs. The kind that give you real pep and energy, the kind that fire you with ambition and the courage to tackle anything set before you.

All I Ask Is Ninety Days

Who says it takes years to get in shape? Show me the man who makes any such claims and I'll make him eat his words. I'll put one full inch on your arm in just 30 days. Yes, and two full inches on your chest in the same length of time. Meanwhile, I'm putting life and pep into your old back-bone. And from then on just watch 'em grow. At the end of thirty days you won't know yourself. Your whole body will take on an entirely different appearance. But you've only started. Now comes the real work. I've only built my foundation. I want just 60 days more (90 in all) and you'll make those friends of yours who think they're strong look like something the cat dragged in.

A Real Man

When I'm through with you, you're a real man. The kind that can prove it. You will be able to do things that you had thought impossible. And the beauty of it is you keep on going. Your deep full chest breathes in rich pure air, stimulating your blood and making you just bubble over with vim and vitality. Your huge, square shoulders, and your massive muscular arms have that craving for the exercise of a regular he man. You have the flash to your eye and the pep to your step that will make you admired and sought after in both the business and social world.



EARLE E. LIEDERMAN, The Muscle Builder

Author of "Muscle Building," "Science of Wrestling," "Secrets of Strength," "Here's Health," "Endurance," Etc.

This is no idle prattle, fellows. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Go ahead. I like it. I have already done this for thousands of others and my records are unchallenged. What I have done for them I will do for you. Come then, for time flies and every day counts. Let this very day be the beginning of new life to you.

SEND FOR MY NEW 64-PAGE BOOK "Muscular Development" **IT IS FREE**

It contains forty-eight full page photographs of myself and some of the many prize-winning pupils I have trained. Some of these came to me as pitiful weaklings, imploring me to help them. Look them over now, and you will marvel at their present physiques. This book will prove an impetus and a real inspiration to you. It will thrill you through and through. This will not obligate you at all, but for the sake of your future health and happiness, do not put it off. Send today—right now, before you turn this page.

EARLE E. LIEDERMAN
DEPT. 1101 305 BROADWAY, N. Y. CITY

EARLE E. LIEDERMAN
Dept. 1101, 305 Broadway, New York City

Dear Sir:—Please send me without any obligation on my part whatever, a copy of your latest book "Muscular Development." (Please write or print plainly.)

Name.....

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOLUME 192 CONTENTS FOR JANUARY 14, 1928 NUMBER 1

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SQUATTERS' RIGHTS

GEORGE M. JOHNSON

will begin to tell the stirring story of a land fight in the cow country.

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 BROADWAY, NEW YORK, N. Y., and
LONDON: HACHETTE & CIE., 16-17 King William Street, Charing Cross, W. C. 2
PARIS: HACHETTE & CIE., 111 Rue Réaumur
WILLIAM T. DEWART, President and Treasurer RICHARD H. TITHERINGTON, Vice-President and Secretary
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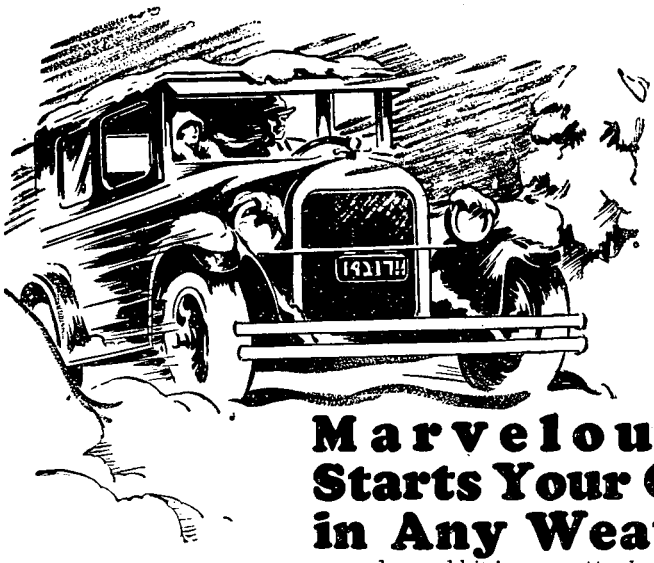


Laugh at Cold Weather

Get out your car. Use it in any kind of weather, cool or cold, blizzard or sunshine, makes no difference, for a

Marvelous Invention Starts Your Car in 2 Seconds in Any Weather

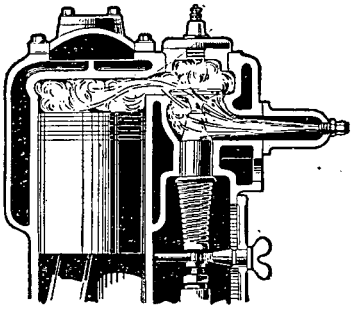
Yes, this is true. Not a bit of exaggeration. No matter how cold it is, no matter how frosty the motor, you can start your car instantly with this new device, the Impelerator. Works from the Dash. Once installed always ready, no extra attachments, no fussing. Always makes starting easy.

Saves Batteries Saves Gasoline

The Impelerator is an amazing invention designed to put POWER into your motor when needed most. No flooded cylinders. No trouble to start in ANY KIND OF WEATHER if you have an Impelerator attached to your Dash. You will find this amazing device will save many times its cost in taking the strain off the battery, in saving gasoline, to say nothing of eliminating trouble and annoyance.

Amazing Results

Truly startling results have been had whenever the Impelerator has been used. Its simplicity, its effectiveness, make it a pleasure to drive any car in the winter. Four cylinders, six cylinders, eight cylinders. All are alike when equipped with the Impelerator. This marvelous device makes cars start easily in any kind of weather. It puts the vital vapor that spells Power into the heart of your engine and makes it start like a race horse.



Puts Power Here

Drive All Winter

You can get real fun out of winter driving for you can let your car stand anywhere without worry. When you are ready to go, no matter what the temperature, use your Impelerator to start your engine instantly. The cost is practically nothing. It fits any car and you can install it yourself in a few minutes, or any garage will install it for you. No extra attachments of any kind, just the complete Impelerator which we send to you, designed to make cold motors start instantly.

Sent on Trial

Thousands of cars equipped with the Impelerator are proof positive that no claim is exaggerated, that the Impelerator will do all and more than we claim for it. As Further Proof, we agree to give you your money back if you install the Impelerator and are not more than satisfied with the result. Try it one day, five days, ten days if you like and if you don't find that it's a real pleasure to start on a cold morning, if you don't find that it always works and that it eliminates all starting trouble due to a cold engine, send it back and we will refund to you every penny that you have sent us. Could anything be more fair, could anything be more positive proof of the tremendous value of this automobile device?

Over 200,000 Sold The Impelerator is a wonderful adaptation of a scientific principle which enables you to start your car instantly in any kind of weather. Over 200,000 have been sold and no owner would sell it at any price if he could not secure another. Letters galore testify to the wonderful value of this amazing device, the cost of which is so little as to be insignificant.

Agents Wanted

Men who like to sell things, men who want to make more money, to be independent of the daily grind of a mere job, men who understand how easy it is to sell a really good thing, write quick for full particulars of the offer which should enable any one to make . . . . . **Big Money**

Don't wait a day. Don't give someone else the chance to get in ahead of you. Grab good territory while it is open. Write or wire now. We believe there are tremendous possibilities in selling this moderate priced device, the Impelerator, which solves most motorists' winter troubles. Write or wire today.

IMPELERATOR CORPORATION

Dept. 1128 25 E. Jackson Blvd. CHICAGO

Impelerator Corporation, Dept. 1128
25 E. Jackson Blvd.,
Chicago, Ill.

You may send me Free information about your trial offer on the Impelerator and tell me how I can have one on my car.

If Interested in Agency Proposition—Check Here ☐

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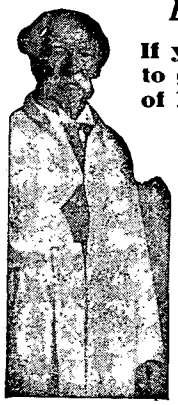
"How I Have Lived To Be 101 Years Old"

By Dr. J. R. W. Ward



"Photographed" August, 1927

If you are sick, and want to get well and live a life of happiness you will

write today for this

FREE BOOK

A Wonderful Message from a Wonderful Doctor!

Dr. Ward, one of the oldest living physicians, who practised for more than 60 years, is now—FOR THE FIRST TIME—giving the public his wonderful formulae.

His amazing book, "How I Have Lived to be 101 Years Old," dealing with almost all ailments, is yours FREE FOR THE ASKING. Read the advice of this wonderful doctor who knows how to live; he knows what he is talking about, as he is now over 101 years old.

MAIL THIS COUPON

Standard Remedies Laboratories, Inc.
1575-60th Street, Brooklyn, New York

Please send me free of charge a copy of Dr. Ward's book. Send it at once.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Please write plainly. 39-A

DOUBLE YOUR INCOME

SELL PIONEER $23.50 All Wool Tailoring

FULL OR PART TIME

MAKE $12.00 A DAY FROM START

Part timemen $5 an hour selling famous Pioneer tailored-to-measure all-wool suits at $23.50. **Commissions Paid in advance.** Striking leather brief case containing 100 large swatch samples furnished—other equally remarkable values at $29.50 and $34.50. We train the inexperienced.

Cash Paid Daily

Men with determination and willingness to work for success write for this big money making opportunity, today.

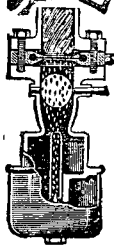
Pioneer Tailoring Co., Congress & Throop Sts. Dept. N-1008, Chicago

THE GREATEST ALL-FICTION MAGAZINE IN THE COUNTRY IS THE

ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

25,000,000 AUTO OWNERS Need This GAS SAVER!

Earn $100 Weekly Selling Them!



An amazing new gas saving invention has been perfected. Owners who have equipped their cars with it report amazing gas saving and notice instant starting, quick pick-up, more power, and disappearance of carbon. Automotive engineers in actual tests have run

Fifty-Nine Miles On a Gallon of Gas!

Men are now being appointed in each locality to take care of the tremendous demand. Territory is going fast. Our men easily can make $5,000.00, $6,000.00, yes, even $10,000.00 a year. Spare time workers make $20.00, and even more, daily.

FREE SAMPLE

A Whirlwind gas saver is provided our workers free to enable them to equip their own car or carry it for demonstration purposes. —Adv.

Send your name today for this free sample and wonderful money-making offer.

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999-152 E. Third St., Milwaukee, Wisconsin

EXTRA STRONG IMPROVED MODEL COPPER BOILER

Catalog Free

5 Gallon	$ 6.50
7	8.85
10	11.90
15	14.20
20	18.50
25	22.50
30	27.50

SAVE 20% NOW!

Most Practical Boiler & Cooker

Made with large 5-inch Improved Cap and Spout. Safe, practical and simple. Nothing to get out of order, most substantial and durable on the market. Will last a lifetime, gives real service and satisfaction.

Easily Cleaned

Cap removed in a second; no burning of hands. An ideal low pressure boiler and pasteurizer for home and farm.

Save 20% by ordering direct from factory. No article of such high quality and utility ever sold at such amazingly low prices. Prices quoted are cash with order or one-fourth cash, balance C. O. D. Send check or money order; prompt shipment made in plain strong box. The only boiler worth having. Large Catalog Free.

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HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION at HOME ~ Only $15.85

Fascinating question and answer method. Used in High Schools. Every subject covered. Easy terms. Certificate awarded. Write for free folder.

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GET RID OF YOUR FAT

Free Trial Treatment

sent on request. Ask for my "pay-when-reduced" offer. I have successfully reduced thousands of persons, without starvation diet or burdensome exercise, often at a rapid rate. **Let me send you proof at my expense.**

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State of New York, 286 Fifth Ave., N. Y. Desk M

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY
WEEKLY

VOLUME 192 SATURDAY, JANUARY 14, 1928 NUMBER 1

The Evil Panorama

By CHARLES FRANCIS COE

Author of "'Geechee Shad," "Moonglow," "Alkali," "Me: Gangster," etc.

CHAPTER I.

PROWLERS.

THE street was narrow and dingy. Its sidewalks laid in square flagstones which were apt to tip under pressure of the foot. The buildings which lined it were ancient and gloomy, their entrances dark and drear; but partially illumined by the glow of flickering gaslights from the halls within.

In the center of the short block was a radiance that, though yellow of color, was more brilliant than any of its neighbors. Over a window which was half covered by a dark cloth burned two gaslights, and behind the window there were more lights in the room.

This place boasted the name of a billiard and pool parlor. There were seven pool tables lined along its narrow confines, and against the pencil-marked walls there stood chairs for men who sat and smoked and watched others play with the soiled, painted balls.

The cloth of the tables had originally been green. It was a greenish brown now, and patched in many places with black adhesive tape.

The room was filled with ill-smelling

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smoke which sifted about the gas lights in billowing clouds. Great boxes filled with sawdust served as cuspidors along the floor. There was sawdust which clung to shoes spread about for ineffective sanitary reasons.

The men who spent their time in the pool room were even more deserving of attention than the room itself. They were all of a type, men whose eyes were never steady and whose hands were apt to be soiled with grime due to infrequent washing.

When they spoke, which was not often, they did so through lips that seemed to twist about the words they uttered. It was as though they feared a lip reader might detect what they said, and so affected speech that was sibilant and did not permit the complete formation of words.

On the whole they were silent men. Their tendency was to sprawl in the wooden chairs along the wall, and when they did play on the faded tables their language was one of dimes and quarters rather than the balls they rolled or the expertness of a shot.

This was Denny Grant's place and the police of New York had long been suspicious of it. In the place gathered the denizens of the underworld, the men who lived by a weird sort of cowardly daring and a fox-like cunning that managed to strike where a blow was unexpected and thus ravage, in a petty way, the society which tolerated them.

Two men entered the place and glanced at the clock on the wall. Above the clock hung a soiled American flag. One of the men shrugged and led the way to chairs at the extreme rear of the room. He was not a big man; yet he had in his carriage a confidence that seemed to surround him with power.

His face was square and slightly swarthy. He might have been of foreign birth. His hands carried the grime of the tenements and under his nails lurked black streaks. His hair, under the check cap he wore, was curly and jet black. His brows were heavy and thick and they nearly met across the bridge of his nose.

Under the brows his eyes gleamed with much the same shoe-button brilliance of a reptile. They darted about as though in a continuous effort to see everything within their range of vision. His clothes were of good quality, but made by the sort of tailor who believes in extra buttons and padded shoulders.

This man was known well in Grant's place. He was known, in fact, to the police who watched Grant's place and to the men who spent their time there. He was a character.

None were certain of his right name. He had served time in a reformatory under the name of Thomas Rann, but that name virtually was forgotten by his associates. To them he was "Jerk."

The name came from the nervousness of his hands. Grimy as they were, there was about them a deftness that would not down. They were serpentine in their darting action, they seemed to flutter like the wings of a frightened bird, and they added to the furtive air of the man.

The two seated themselves in the chairs at the end of the room, and Jerk Rann leaned close to his friend.

"It's too early," he whispered through twisted lips. "We wanna make this lay about two in the mornin'."

The other man nodded silently, glanced at the clock, and noted the hour, which was twelve thirty.

"How long'll it take us to git up there, Jerk?" he queried.

"Time enough—I'll handle that," Jerk grumbled. Then he rolled a cigarette for himself, drawing the little bag shut by catching the string between his teeth the while he held the unrolled paper and tobacco between the fingers of one hand. There was an amazing deftness about the working of his hands and fingers.

The other man lapsed into a willing silence. To casual visitors who entered the pool room they granted but passing attention. Most of the men who came in saw Jerk and spoke to him in a friendly manner, but the answer, or lack of it, they received was evidence enough of Jerk's desire to be alone with his friend.

When the cigarette was finished Jerk touched the other man's arm and rose. They sauntered from the place together, Jerk pausing at one of the tables to watch

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a shot and laughing disdainfully when the effort to pocket the ball failed.

"I'd like to play you fer some real gelt some time!" he sneered with twisted lip at the player.

The man nodded good-naturedly, but made no answer. He appeared to be afraid of Jerk. Every one did, as a matter of fact. To watch him among these men was to gain the impression that he ruled them by fear.

The confidence of his bearing, the weird deftness of his grimy hands seemed to scream of power, control. And the light of his beady, darting eyes bespoke a willingness to assert power that was undeniable.

The two went out of the pool room and walked slowly along the littered, narrow street. They seemed like shadows in the gloomy light. As they reached the corner Jerk espied the figure of a policeman standing beneath a street light. His mouth twisted into a sneer again, but he spoke to the officer as they passed him.

Soon they reached an elevated structure and climbed the stairs to await an uptown train. They rode for nearly half an hour before leaving the train, well out into the residential section of the city where the suburban still maintained a lingering touch in the shape of wide lawns and trees and flowers.

There was no moon as they turned into a wide street each side of which was lined with great houses. They stopped beside a trimmed hedge as a closed carriage rolled noiselessly through the street, the clatter of the horses' hoofs sounding more like music than just noise.

They heard the wheels of the coach grate along the stones of a driveway down the street. Then Jerk grunted some word and started onward again. Presently he stopped before a large house in which but one light glowed and that in the entryway.

For a long moment he stood still in the shadows and then, taking the other's hand, he led the way rapidly over the dark lawn, past the dim lit entryway and around to the rear of the house. Shortly there came a faint scraping noise as Jerk slid a steel jimmy under a window.

The lock crackled some as it gave away, and again the two waited a long time, silent, watchful, ready for trouble if trouble came.

Satisfied once more, Jerk boosted his helper to the sill and was, in turn, lifted upward by the other man. Soon they were in the house and with the aid of a tiny spotlight that could be darkened instantly by a shutter across its lens, the two worked their way through the lower floor and to the stairs that led upward.

Jerk was ever the master, ever certain of every move. The other man followed silently, keeping close to Jerk by reason of a light touch against the leader's arm.

They gained the second floor, the great house as silent as a tomb. At the head of the stairs Jerk paused again, finally flashing his tiny light about in order to clear a way through articles of furniture.

They trod silently along the hall toward the front of the house and, again with the aid of the fleeting light, located the door into the master's bedroom. Jerk tried the door silently and just as silently it opened under his pressure and the twisted smile came to his lips again.

He jerked his arm suggestively and received a pressure of understanding from the fingers that gripped it. Then the two went into the room. Once more the light flashed and went out. Jerk moved toward a huge bed which was partly covered by an ornate canopy. The other man stood still until Jerk had gained the side of the bed and flashed the light again.

Like a luminous eye the ray of light traced its way over the walls of the room coming to rest, at last, upon a little wall safe that offered but piteous resistance to such as these two men. With a nod the second man walked to the safe and Jerk flashed out the light.

There came the faint clatter of metal against metal followed by a constant hum that might have been the purr of a contented kitten. The figure on the canopied bed stirred uneasily and the humming ceased. The figure moved fretfully, the bed creaking ever so faintly.

Jerk flashed the tiny light toward the foot of the bed, and in its faint, reflected

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glow he saw that the occupant of the bed was a girl. Her hair lay across the white pillow in great, billowing waves; her face was beautiful beyond expression, he thought.

He would have been glad to see her eyes opened; he was certain, even in that tense moment, that they would be as glorious as the silken gold of her hair.

He jerked his hand upward in warning to the man at the safe, however, and once again extinguished the light by snapping the black shutter across the lens. As he stood there in the dark he saw again, in his imagination, the sleeping figure beside him.

The girl's breast had risen and fallen rhythmically, and he believed her to be asleep soundly. But Jerk was an old hand at burglary, and he knew better than to take chances. He must flash the light at frequent intervals, else the girl might rouse and sound a sudden and panicky, but none the less fatal, warning.

Jerk did not want to bother the girl. He hoped, of course, that she would remain asleep only to find the safe robbed when morning had come and the world was no longer festooned in shadows.

On the other hand—if she did wake and refused to lie quiet! He had no thought of sacrificing his liberty for one of the dingy cells he had tasted not so long ago!

He flashed the light again, signaling the other man to continue his work on the safe. Again came the purring sound and again the beautiful girl stirred fretfully, threw one arm above her head, and shifted her body a little.

But Jerk did not call for a cessation on the drilling this time. In the faint glow of his light he could see the other man with a hand drill pressed hard against his chest and his right hand whirling the wheel that sent the sharp drill biting into the iron of the little wall safe.

Soon the purring of the drill ceased and faint sounds of movement came from the second man. Once again Jerk flashed the light, and this time he drew back with a short gasp. The eyes of the beautiful girl were wide. She was awake.

"Who? What?" she said, her voice tense with excitement. The man at the safe whirled about, but Jerk was quicker. He lunged forward, his grimy hand gripping the girl's mouth, and the dark lantern falling silently to the bed beside her, where its tiny ray sprayed full upon Jerk's face.

The girl struggled with all her strength, utterly ignoring Jerk's profane commands to silence. But she could not free herself from the stifling, gagging hand that gripped her lips.

"Soup that can!" Jerk snarled at the other man. "Soup it quick. I'll keep this dame quiet!"

Immediately the other man went into pockets that had been well prepared. He drew forth a tiny phial, a cake of soap, and a fuse. The contents of the phial he poured into the hole he had drilled. Then he laid the fuse, and about it all he scraped the soft soap.

Next he snatched a heavy silk comforter from the bed where Jerk struggled with the fighting but helpless girl. A match flared, the comforter was flung against the wall safe and held in place. Almost immediately came a smothered boom. There was an exultant cry from the second man, and more rapid orders from Jerk:

"Clean it!" he snapped. "Everythin', now! What we don't want we'll ditch somewhere else. Lemme know when you got it all, an' don't miss nothin', savvy?"

The girl had gained a sitting position now, and it took all of Jerk's strength to keep her subdued. He snarled profane commands in her ear to which she gave not the slightest heed.

The second man called shortly that all was well and they had better get away. Jerk spoke again to the girl, told her that she would be unharmed if she promised to be quiet and come to the lower window with them while they made their escape. Her answer was to fight more violently.

"Fer de luvva Pete," the other man pleaded in strained tones, "come on! That soup'll wake folks up, Jerk!"

With a snarl and curse that was akin to the hateful whine of the feline, Jerk freed one of his grimy hands, clenched it into a fist, and crashed it against the beautiful face he had smothered.

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A low moan came from the girl and her figure went limp in his arms. Then he struck her again, this time aiming, with the aid of the dark lantern, at her dainty chin.

The girl dropped to the bed as though the blow had killed her. Jerk snarled another oath, then whirled and led the way back into the hall, down the stairs, and out through the window they had jimmied. As they made their escape a light glowed on the third floor, and he laughed callously.

"Servants!" he grunted. Then the two sped across the wide lawn again to the street, and the second man ran huddled over as though he might be clinging to papers that were secreted under his shirt.

CHAPTER II.

HATRED.

JERK RANN'S room had been the scene of many furtive meetings. He lived in one of the tenements close by the pool room, and what cleaning of the place was done always took place under his own watchful eye. He trusted no man.

The streaked walls and the glowing, stained ceiling could have told many a startling tale had they but lips with which to speak. In that squalid room had come and gone creatures of the night for whom the police of a continent were in search.

In the flickering light of the single gas jet had twinkled gems filched from the wealthy and offered at a fraction of their worth into the clutching hands of fences who dealt only in stolen goods.

The little table in the center of the room had supported, from time to time, wealth that, were it accumulated at once, must have set the piece of furniture to groaning from sheer weight.

It was to this room that Jerk and his companion came from their robbery of the great house in the suburbs. With hands that darted to their every task, Jerk lit the gas and flooded a yellow glow about the room.

Then he went to every corner, moved every picture to peer behind it, went to his knees and peered beneath the bed, before he allowed a word to be spoken. After that he sat at the little table and rolled a cigarette.

"I guess," he whispered crookedly, "everythin's awright."

The other man sat opposite him and emptied forth the contents of his shirt. The haul was a good one. There was a considerable sum of money, which the two divided equally. There were several pieces of jewelry, and a large envelope containing papers.

It was to the latter which Jerk finally turned. The envelope was sealed, but his stained, blunt finger quickly tore the paper apart. Inside were other papers and several crudely drawn maps.

An exclamation of disgust crossed his lips, and he dropped the papers on the table and slid his chair back ever so little the while his beady eyes glared into the face of his associate in crime.

"There ain't nothin' in that," he growled, his quick hand motioning toward the litter of maps and notations. The other man leaned over the papers and said in surprise:

"Gee, Alaska, ain't it?" He picked up one of the maps, which had been scrawled on a paper bearing a date line which read, "Nome, Alaska."

"That'll do us a lot o' good!" Jerk sneered, and at the tone the other man looked up and caught the glare in Jerk's beady eyes so plainly that he trembled a little and his chin sagged toward his chest while a look of inquiry overspread his face.

Finally, for want of something better to do, he caught up the map and glanced at it and said:

"It says this here is a gold claim, Jerk. Gee, mebbe it's worth a flock of money!"

Jerk reached across the table in his quick way and snatched the map from the other's fingers. Then he scooped up all the papers and put them back into the envelope, and put the envelope in an inner pocket the while his glaring eyes remained steadfast upon the other's face. He showed no real interest in the papers; it was merely that his mind was working in disassociation with his hands, and the latter could not remain idle.

"Them gold mines ain't worth a damn,

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an' you know it," he growled. "But how about the fine trick you played on me tonight? Wise guy, ain't you?" There was a maddening sneer about his twisted lips and his eyes glared balefully, hatefully, suspiciously.

"What's the matter?" the second man asked. "Lawd! I done my part pretty enough, Jerk—what's eatin' you?"

"How about when I had that dame on the bed an' was tellin' you to git the job done? What did you do then?" Jerk demanded implacably.

"I souped the box—done it swell!"

"An' what else did you do?" Jerk snarled, his face growing cloudier with the passing of each second, his quick hands writhing as though lashed by emotion and impatience.

The other man wet his lips nervously, clearly in doubt as to what to say, utterly mystified by the queer charges of Jerk.

"I done whatever you said to do, Jerk," he half whined. "I dunno what you're talkin' about. I thought everything was swell."

Jerk had leaned across the table now and was staring with unwinking eyes into the other's face.

"You know damned well what you done!" he snarled. "You tried to make a fool outa me—tried to fasten the whole works on me! You know damned well you did, too!"

The second man tried to speak, but words would not come. His face had gone deadly pale, and his tongue darted forth constantly to sweep over lips that burned with an unknown fear.

Jerk's right hand lay still, now. The left danced its incessant gestures, waved its emphasis, fascinated in its serpentine writhing, but the right lay cold and still across the little table.

"When that dame woke up," Jerk went on softly, "an' she started to fight an' knocked the glimmer outa my hands so's it laid on the bed an' winked at my mug—that dame seen me then! She might recognize me now!"

"That wasn't my fault!" the other man cried. "I wasn't nowhere near you, Jerk!"

"No. But what did you do then? What did you say that'll stick in that broad's brain like feathers on a chicken?"

"I dunno. I swear I don't! I don't think I said nothin' that'll hurt us, Jerk."

"You said," Jerk snapped angrily, "just what I'm goin' to repeat fer you now. Here it is: 'That soup'll wake folks up, Jerk!' That's what you said, you rat! An' every copper in the business knows I'm Jerk!"

"I never said that! I never meant—"

"It's what you said," Jerk charged murderously. "An' it's what counts with me! I gotta blow this part o' the country this very night! Before that broad gets a chance to pipe the news—an' what do I blow on? How much money do I need—fer where I'm goin'?"

"Lawd 'l'mighty, Jerk!" the second burglar pleaded. As he spoke he started to rise, but Jerk's right hand, that hand which had lain so motionless, came instantly to life.

There was a flashing twist of the wrist, a ducking of the knuckles that was like lightning, and in Jerk's right hand appeared a revolver as small and as compact as was the dark lantern he carried, but as murderous-appearing to the other man as ghastly death itself.

"Don't, Jerk!" he begged, his face twisting into hideous terror. "Don't do that!"

Jerk laughed softly, his lips twisting again as he did so. "No?" he grinned. "An' why not? I need all the money outa this deal, an' I'm goin' to have it!"

"I'll give it to you, Jerk!" the man agreed readily. "I'll come across." As he spoke he dumped forth his share of the money and the jewels they had divided. Jerk took them, and a look of relief came into the other's face.

"An' now that I got 'em," Jerk sneered, "I suppose I'm to make my get-away an' leave you here to spread the words against me, huh? Not Jerk Rann don't do that!"

Before his accomplice in the burglary could offer further plea, before he realized the deadly purpose that actuated Jerk Rann, the little gun spoke. It was a sharp report.

A staccato echo filled the little room for

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an instant, then the terrified victim sagged backward, groped wildly for support, and was prevented from falling only because Jerk was around the table quickly and caught him in his arms.

"Yuh—yuh double crosser!" the dying man managed to gasp.

Jerk laughed softly again, leered into the face of his victim, and said: "Smart, ain't you—callin' names?"

After that there remained but silence, and the faint and acrid odor of gunpowder that had burned its death incense. Jerk needed but a glance to tell him that his work had been complete. The man he clutched in his arms was dead.

He waited for a few moments, making no move, supporting the dead man quite calmly while he listened for sounds that might follow the shot he had fired. None came.

A smile of satisfaction crept about his twisted mouth, and he lugged the body to a rickety sofa and draped it there. Then he went to the door, the little gun ready for action in his hand. The shadowy hall was empty.

He went back and lugged the terrible burden from the couch, his hands becoming moist from the dead man's clothing as he did so. Out into the hall he carried his victim, then to the stairs and up the stairs, and finally deposited the crumpled form on the floor above his own.

Next he flashed his little light and examined the floor for spots of blood. There was none he could find. Shortly he was back in his room and, working with the speed which characterized his every move, he took from various hiding places rolls of money. These he stuffed into clothing that had been tossed onto his bed.

The last thing he did in the room was to change his garments from shoes to cap. Then he slipped out the door and into the hall again, down the stairs like a shadow and out into the ill-lit street.

He turned toward the river and, without undue haste, soon found himself along the railroad tracks. Jerk knew the territory well. His criminal career had begun in this locality; his first crime had been the robbing of freight cars, and he knew when and where the trains went.

In less than half an hour from the time the spiteful bark of the little pistol had snuffed out the life of his comrade, Jerk was sitting quite calmly atop a rolling freight car, and the lights of the city were wheeling past him rapidly.

Jerk was satisfied with the way in which matters had gone. There was little enough to criticize from his own viewpoint. True, the police would trace the killing of his accomplice to him, and doubtless they would broadcast a reward for him. But that meant little, after all.

Jerk had ample money to carry him wherever he wanted to go. He would simply be sure to go far enough. Perhaps he would leave the country altogether and rely upon his wits and daring to prosper in a foreign land. As he saw it, there was no immediate worry.

The girl of the great house would tell the police all they needed to know to start them after him. They would go to his room and find it locked. Doubtless they would break in the door and search. What they found would not help them in the slightest.

Then they probably would lie in wait for him to return. In the morning the body of his accomplice would be found and the murder would overshadow the robbery. Much time would be lost in tying the two crimes together and realizing that Jerk had left town.

The police would watch trains, perhaps—but after the bird had flown! At Albany Jerk would equip with a new outfit of clothing and then travel in style to the West Coast.

The country out there was comparatively new and offered, he understood, a fertile field to gamblers and others with the wits of smart men and the courage to fight when it was advisable.

So Jerk planned and thought as he rode the uneven car. He smoked leisurely, almost happily. There was a certain pride he felt in himself and the night's work. After all, it was better to find fields anew.

Soon the placid Hudson loomed at his left. Like a vast mirror it spread away from him, glistening in the light of the stars. A feeling of peace came to him, a feeling of success.

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After all, who was greater than he? Had he not dominated the underworld? Had not men leaped at his beck and call, and had he not left as a monument to himself the death of another?

He would do as well in a new country. He would make men obey him, and with the little pistol that nestled so cunningly up his sleeve he would cut his way to riches. There was none to stop him; the country needed men like him, what with its talk of gold to the North and cattle to the South!

Against his chest rattle the envelope with the maps inside it. He smiled faintly. After all, he might even locate a real gold mine and have money enough to buy every man and woman he wanted!

CHAPTER III.

THE GOLD COAST.

IN the four months that followed Jerk Rann's sudden flight from the city in which he had risen to heights in the underworld, he traveled far and learned a great deal. In that time he had covered what there was of a railroad toward the great West. Then he had managed to catch on with wagon trains that streamed across the Great Plains.

There had been little difficulty in finding means of transportation. In the course of time Jerk learned to ride a horse well, and, for fear of rousing suspicion, he dressed himself in the garb of the people with whom he worked.

His cap was replaced by a sombrero, his silk shirts with the trailing cuffs by heavy flannel ones gaudily checked and colored.

The suit with the padded shoulders and the many buttons he had long since discarded in the interest of safety. But in one thing he remained different. He always wore a coat. The reason was simplicity itself, he needed a loose sleeve to house the murderous little pistol upon which he staked his all.

Even when, in the course of events, he purchased a heavy Colt and wore it openly about his hips, the little weapon was safely within his coat sleeve, and it was to it that he would turn first.

But only the exterior of the man had changed. Inside he was the same sneak, the same thief, the same coward that every bandit of the cities is. His mind ran in single and narrow ruts. The work which fell to his lot he did only to cover ground. It was distasteful to him, and inwardly he sneered at those of the travelers who talked ambitiously of ranches and of farming.

He became even more secretive as time passed and contact with these strange and hardy people lengthened. He responded in a degree to his environment, but always in a critical sense.

The vastness of the plains, the careless manners of the people, and the very looseness with which their affairs seemed temporarily knitted together served to increase his feeling of security.

Who, he asked himself, ever could locate him here? His crimes of the past seemed to him but a fund of experience upon which he could draw for future operations.

San Francisco was his goal. The San Francisco of which men spoke in frenzied terms. He would sit by the fire of a wagon train camp when night had settled over the vast prairie and listen with rapt attention to tales of guides who had seen the Western city.

He longed to get there. His eyes would glow brilliantly at the stories of gambling houses, of gun fights, of narrow streets that ran with blood and money, and of people who asked no questions and did much as they pleased.

His nervous hands would jerk with excitement when he was told of the saloons that lined the street, of the prospectors who had struck gold and wandered into town with the one idea of throwing their strike into the arms of licentious indulgence and ribald celebration of good fortune.

Others spoke of the appearance of law and order in the city, too. These were wont to say that the old days had passed, and that commerce was erecting fine buildings and widening the streets of the city.

But there was always talk of the Barbary Coast, of the Gold Coast, of the charms that waited men of all kinds and types and breeds.

Through long days of blinding heat and

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arid, alkalescent breezes, Jerk Rann plodded on. When impatience chafed him too seriously he found surcease in imagination and plans.

For such as he, it seemed, there was a throne awaiting usurpation. He had every intention of mounting that throne and of ruling, if need be, with the tiny, hidden death machine that rubbed soothingly against his arm.

And yet there was an ever-present fear about him too. He had never known men such as these hardy and gruff people who traveled across the plains in wagons and laughed confidently at the thought of attack by Indians or road agents. He wondered at the manner of the guides he met, and the way in which their heavy guns exerted a spell over him.

Something whispered to his inner consciousness that these men would not easily submit to a dominion that interfered with their rights. They would not tolerate a parasite who neither spun nor wove, but who lived as Jerk Rann was determined to live.

An incident that occurred in lower Texas served to augment his doubts on that score. There was a gambler named Phelps who appeared when the train laid over at a small prairie town. The man, against the orders of the train captain, had undertaken the business of his craft. Shortly he had become winner of a great amount.

Then the captain, a hearty and calm man, returned and discovered what had taken place. The captain seemed to regard his charges as children. He smiled tolerantly and ordered the game stopped. The gambler, suave and hateful, rose to his feet and demanded the reason for such an order.

"You," Jerk heard the captain say, "ain't nothin' but a damned card sharp here tuh rob these tenders! I won't stand fer it—that's all!"

Like a flash the hand of the gambler darted toward his shoulder. But quicker by far was the draw of the calm leader. The massive gun at his belt was out before the gambler's hand had even reached its destination. Jerk had never seen anything like what took place.

The heavy gun roared and the gambler, a look of infinite surprise on his bearded face, took a backward step, tossed his arms convulsively, swayed a moment, then pitched forward on his face.

"Lawd!" one of the card players gasped, and Jerk looked about at a circle of drawn, white faces. Somewhere near at hand a woman screamed and fainted.

The captain bent over the dead man and went through his clothes. From a strap at his shoulder he drew forth a small derringer pistol and with a sniff of disdain hurled it far out into the grass and dust of the plains.

"Any gent," he grunted, "that lugs a secret like that around with him has got a right tuh be salivated!"

Presently he turned to the stricken men about him.

"You seen him go fer that little gun," he said quietly. "Now you can gather up that money and divide it accordin' to yore losses.

"An' don't gamble no more! I said thet afore, gents. I mean it—I'll kill gamblers free and plenty. I don't want no hard feelin's 'mong the men o' this train till I land you-all where yo're goin'!"

Jerk Rann knew that the episode was closed, or would be with the digging of a shallow and unmarked grave. But its effect upon him was mighty. He looked upon the fallen man and the features seemed to be those of his partner in the robbery of the great house.

He shook himself as though to be rid of the notion and it was borne in upon him that what he had seen was not murder. It was a gun fight with the better man winning in behalf of what was right.

What he had done, in the killing of his associate, had been insidious, cold-blooded, cowardly murder. He had given his man no chance.

But these were no qualms of conscience. Rather they took the form of a decision in his mind not to meddle with these men of the great guns, not to give them any indication of his own intention to resent.

That evening when the shadows were thick he went out onto the plains for one of his cigarettes. His rat eyes darted through the darkness and his hand jerked

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nervously. Again and again he saw the death combat between the gambler and the leader of the train, and again and again he measured his own fighting qualities against those shown.

Twice he snapped his wrist and felt the grateful touch of his little pistol. After all—the leader would be no match for him! A mere darting twist of the hands and a shot! The leader would die before he knew that Jerk intended fighting! From the thought he drew consolation, but an innate cowardice assured him over and over that he must avoid fighting openly.

He showed an avid interest in all stories of the place to which he was going. He drank in eagerly details of the customs of the people.

Once the captain himself told him that his coat would attract a deal of attention out there where coats were seldom worn. But Jerk merely nodded, promising himself never to give up the coat until he might find a shirt sleeve that would house his little gun safely.

So the days passed as ponderously, as endlessly, as changelessly as the very journey they made. Through and over the vast mountains, across brackish and rushing rivers, around bogs and mires and quicksands, the trail led them.

As they passed they left, from time to time, marks of their passing that were to become epic in the history of the land, broken wagon wheels, leaky pots and pans, the carcasses of mules and horses that had withered under the incessant drive.

Now and then the train would halt for a longer time than usual and the men, with bared heads, would stand silent as a brief and perhaps raucous service was read over the final resting place of a human being. Over the mound they would place with horny and clumsy, but tender, hands, the little wooden cross that soon passed away under the sweep of the prairie winds or perhaps the rooting paws of a coyote.

Onward, ever onward, and throughout the journey the impatience of Jerk Rann was on the increase; his silence becoming largely a matter of habit, his suspicion of all men and all things becoming more a part of him.

Now they met trains more frequently. Other trails converged with the one they followed and new faces appeared. They were, the leader said, but a week out if luck held.

A week! After all these months, a single week between Jerk Rann and freedom!

The shouts of the men as they circled the train that night carried a new note. The morale of the travelers increased as though by magic.

The yarns of the new land that lay just before them multiplied in number, and speculation became rife. Even the clatter of cooking pans took on a peculiarly musical tone and the world seemed a finer and better place.

Ahead lay the new land. Ahead lay the Gold Coast with its raw border, its free people, its blare and riches. One week!

Jerk's first sight of San Francisco was both a joy and a disappointment. He did not wait for the lumbering wagons to draw into the town. For more than an hour outriders had been appearing along the trail to greet them.

There were Mexicans and Spaniards and whites. All of them rode beautiful horses and most of them were picturesquely dressed. Jerk looked carefully about him, but of all the riders that greeted the train he failed to find one who was unarmed.

The fact made him uneasy. His greatest stock in trade had been a carefully hidden pistol. Here he saw nothing but pistols, and they hung in holsters that showed a polish back of the weapon's butt as though frequent drawings were in order.

He feared those guns, feared the clear eyes and the demeanor of the men who wore them.

Presently a swarthy half-breed riding an elegant horse singled out Jerk. It was evident that the man was proud of the English which he spoke. If he possessed a dialect at all it was confined almost entirely to drawl. It was as though he spoke slowly that he might carefully select and pronounce his words.

His hair was jet black and long. His eyes were as beady as Jerk's own, and he wore the air of a man who has happily found his kind when he approached Jerk.

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Jerk, through some psychological kinship which he did not pause to analyze, sensed the coming of his own breed in the man.

"You come to new countree!" the man smiled, and Jerk noted a tendency to lift his upper lip away from snowy white teeth as he spoke. It gave the impression that the swarthy one was biting his words, chiseling out a meaning not otherwise expressed.

Jerk nodded.

"I greet you," the man smiled again. "I am Jose Capadon. I live easee, work little, seek what you call friend—"

"I done enough work, Jose," Jerk grumbled, "in the last four months to satisfy any guy fer life!"

"Quick," Jose muttered. "Follow me—I ask no names, you see!"

"I just as lief tell you me monniker, Jose," Jerk said. "It's Williams—Johnnie Williams—but folks always call me Jerk."

"Jerk?" Jose repeated, giving a peculiar and somewhat amusing twist to the word. "I weel call you—Jerk, si?"

Then he wheeled his horse and started away. As he did so the leader of the train called a halt and spoke to the men of the wagons, warning them against losing their order in the excitement of arrival. He asked that all remain at their regular posts until they had actually reached the town and settled at the end of the long trip.

To this request Jerk turned a deaf ear. With a scornful wave of his hand he deserted his friends of many weeks and followed the form of Jose Capadon.

The trail the man followed led into a row of canvas tents. Outside the tents were piled many pots and pans and bedding and paraphernalia.

Jose smiled his sneering greeting and spoke to men who stood before the tents. It was all new to Jerk, but he quickly sensed that Jose was working to a purpose that had to do with the incoming train.

The swarthy man accosted several of the men in the tents. He spoke to them as anxious-eyed women and children gazed upward at himself and Jerk.

He explained that Jerk was of the train and would treat for them with the new arrivals. Jerk, of course, knew which wagons were best, which equipment was safe to buy. If they intrusted their business to himself and Jerk, he told them, they could not go wrong.

And so came three weary and anxious men and offered their money that wagons might be bought and a start back to God's country be made for their wives and their children. Discouragement was stamped deep on their brows; in their eyes burned the embers left by a new and a raw country. Jose managed to gather something over two thousand hard-earned dollars before he clicked heels to his mount and set out again after the train.

The men who had paid their money never heard from Jose or Jerk again. They waited, hopelessly, for word, then disappeared, God alone knew where or how, into the maw of a new land.

This affair appealed no little to Jerk, though he wondered at the openness and audacity with which it had been done. That fear, however, quickly dispelled itself under the magic of Jose's biting grimace.

"You will meet beeg men here," the half-breed said finally. "You are the kind they see beeg things for, Jerk. Come, I show you. Here—money!"

And so the two rode into San Francisco. The roads were but trails in that part of town, the houses of rough boards here and there covered with tar paper. Hoofs sank deep into mutilated moist earth, wagons mired and called forth much shouting and bellowing.

Here and there cattle were bunched in small corrals, and at almost every corner horse sales were under way. There were hundreds of small tents, a few larger ones under which bars were in operation, and here and there Jerk saw gambling tables and faro layouts and roulette wheels.

Women were plentiful, some of them, most of them, somber, wearied, dressed in the roughest of clothing and gazing through eyes that seemed deadened by some inward inertia of mentality and physique. Others were gaudily dressed with much jewelry on both hands and gorgeous Spanish shawls of a million hues draped over their sinuous shoulders.

Jerk saw these and placed them. He knew from their painted faces, their auda-

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cious mien, their insincere smiles and their open smoking of cigarettes that they fattened upon man and lived their youth in a whirl of a new world where lusts were rampant and where righteousness spoke with thunderous voice as each man saw it and enforced it.

Here was the Gold Coast! Jerk loved it at once. He seemed at home there. How far away was New York and the silent policemen who sought to reach him for the killing of a man! How safe he was, and how vast and wild and hectic and desirable was the muddy world which now opened unto him!

The Gold Coast! Here every one talked of claims and strikes and mines. Jerk's hand moved upward and clutched the maps and notations that had been in the envelope taken from the little wall safe. It would be easy, he knew, to sell these to some unsuspecting fool.

What a glorious place was this Gold Coast! Jose led the way under a high tent and smiled from the saddle down upon a man of his own color who worked feverishly behind a rude bar. The man waved and smiled an answer. Then Jose called him forth and led him to Jerk.

"Thees," he said with his slow, grimacing manner, "ees one friend—Jerk!"

The man raised black eyes and smiled a greeting as he held up his hand. Jerk accepted the clasp, and he and Jose drank fiery whisky without so much as leaving their saddle.

Then Jose waved a happy and careless hand, and the two rode through the narrow road and down toward the town proper, Jerk following his new friend quite willingly and with great expectations.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LONG ARM.

ON both sides of the road, which was little more, at that time, than a mired trail, stood tents. Jerk had never seen anything like it before, and gazed upon this new mode of life with eyes that stood wide with wonderment. He had never suspected that whole families would or could live as these people were living.

There was a strange exhilaration in the very wildness of the place; yet, too, Jerk felt a deep set fear of the rough and ready men by whom he found himself surrounded. They were too big and strong, he thought; too ready to meet whatever exigency arose with a freedom of action that was somewhat terrifying.

Profanity seemed the mode of expression among many of these riders of the Gold Coast. Among others words were seldom spoken, and when they came their tone was soft as a woman's and ominous as the whir of the dread rattler. Here was his new world.

But Jerk Rann missed the tipping flagstones of sidewalks; he missed the yellow glow of gaslights and the convenient dark corner where a thief might hide away when danger was imminent.

Jose led the way into the center of the town and toward a huge board building. At a hitch rail outside the place they tied their horses and then entered. Jose was obviously at home. He walked toward the long bar at one end of the single room with the confidence that thrives only in familiarity.

Jerk glanced about him cautiously. The place was filled with men, and even now, in the bright daylight, a vast oil lamp festooned with colored paper glowed over the rough bar. Men drank with varied degrees of satisfaction.

At one end of the bar four or five loud-speaking individuals had gathered about one man, and their raucous laughter attuned itself as best it could with the clink of glasses and the pounding of heavy gold pokes upon the bar.

Jerk saw at once that the man they surrounded was the one paying for the drinks. He was a whiskered individual dressed in soiled clothes, a shabby hat adorning his head.

Under the brim of the hat, long and unkempt hair showed about his ears. His ancient shirt was open at the throat, his great hands, mud-stained and twisted by the ravages of toil, banged upon the bar or fished into the open shirt and drew forth

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a heavily laden poke that drinks might again be served.

The man looked to Jerk as a tramp might have looked. In the laying of his thieving plans the tenement bandit would have selected this fellow as the last man on earth to have money. Yet here he was fairly spraying the place with clear yellow gold!

Jose seemed to divine his new friend's thoughts, and he nudged Jerk with his elbow and purred some of his slow, carefully mouthed words, the white of his teeth showing as always back of his brown lips.

"Prospector," he explained. "There are manee such, my Jerk. The Brownies live much upon such fools. You shall see!"

"Brownies?" Jerk asked in surprised tone. "I've seen everythin' but a brownie out here! Next thing I know you'll be tossin' out a coupla fairies or angels or mermaids."

Jose's silvery laughter rang out even above the noise of the bar.

"Brownies," he explained, "they are not what you think! The Brownies are a gang, my Jerk—a gang of such as you and me who take what we seek and ask none the deefrence!"

Then he caught Jerk's arm and led him toward the rear of the place and to a group of three silent men who leaned against the long bar and surveyed with calm eyes the ribald joy about them.

One of these men was obviously of Spanish or Mexican extraction, and his fingers twined slowly through a well-cropped mustachio as he watched them approaching.

His eyes, Jerk thought, glittered. It was to him that Jose made his greeting, bowing a little ostentatiously and raising his right palm in a sort of half salute.

"My friend, Jerk," he announced, waving with his left hand toward Rann, "already he has come into the Brownies, *señor*. See! We have caught monee!"

Again the silvery laugh came, and Jose threw back his black head as his hand reached into his shirt and drew forth the money he had stolen from the anxious waiters for freedom back along the trail.

The stranger at the bar glanced lingeringly at Jerk. There a gimlet quality to his eyes, and Jerk had the uncomfortable feeling that this man saw through him and delved instantly into the secrets of his mind.

"Jerk Williams—he is tell me!" Jose went on blithely.

The other man finally spoke: "The Brownies need no one, but will take this Jerk," he said, and the Eastern robber noticed that to the word Jerk he gave the same indefinable oral twist that was Jose's habit.

Jose laughed again; he was a happy sort of devil, Jose, the sort who entrances with a smile the while he plots thievery and pillage.

But the other man was talking again, his tones possessed of velvety smoothness.

"You are foolish, Jose," he said. "The law is riding moch these days. It is better that we not trample upon it in the very streets. Come, we will drink."

The barkeep seemed awaiting such an order, and the service was instant and courteous. But Jose merely smiled away the words of warning uttered by the more thoughtful man.

Jose could see naught in life but the right of might, and might always had been his because the Brownies were of the strongest of the gangs that robbed and pillaged old San Francisco, and Jose was well known as a Brownie.

"You may laugh," the other man said calmly, "but this Raynor is a fighter. But last night he went to the Golden Nugget and alone dragged forth two men—you will see them twisting yonder at the end of a rope! Many people, fools all, aid this Raynor. He will breeng law to careless ones, Jose."

Jose raised his glass, the upper lip of his mouth drawing back again in his ceaseless and mirthless smile.

"To the good Colonel Raynor," he sneered, then sibilantly: "Me thinks he is moch too smart to bother Jose Capadon!"

The men drank, and Jerk joined them. The whisky poured into his throat like molten metal. His eyes streamed water and his throat contracted until it seemed he could not breathe. Never had Jerk Rann tasted whisky the like of this before.

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But he dared not complain, dared not refuse to drink again. He was lonely in spite of his new friendships. He was afraid. By nature he had been furtive; by training he had become silent and tricky and secretive. The openness with which these men committed and talked of crime frightened him.

"You would do bettair, Jose," the quiet man with the gimlet eyes was saying, "to wait for big game. There are trains well packed, waiting to be robbed, and the store needs supplies."

"All in good time, *señor!*" Jose complained jovially. "What, I ask you, is required of a man to rob a train? It is too easee, *señor*! A few riders, a dash, perchance a shot or two, then run the wagons into the hills and take what we please to bring back to town and sell!"

He waved a deprecatory hand as though in dismissal of so simple a thing.

"Better it is, nevertheless," the other stated calmly, "not to breeng about us thees law for a paltry sum."

Jose banged upon the bar, shouted for drinks which were instantly served. "Let heem come, this Raynor!" he shouted. "I, Jose Capadon, have fear for no man!"

So they drank and the more quiet man at the end of the bar did not press his case further, though Jerk had a feeling that he was right and that Jose was talking with the impetuosity of youth and the blind confidence of a day gone.

He noticed that the quiet man kept his eyes on the one door of the place as though attempting to preclude a surprise entry.

Presently the talk veered to Seattle, the town far to the north. Rumors had come of gold in the snowy reaches of Alaska, and men talked of millions in the yellow dust and mentioned nuggets the size of hen's eggs, nuggets of clear gold that filled a man's palm twice over.

"Captain Wilkes is here," one man of the three said slowly. "He was never a man to lie. He states to me that Alaska is the gold strike of all time; he states that the days of '49 were as a breeze to a sandstorm when measured against the Alaska of to-day.

"He speaks much of the Yukon. He tells of a man so rich he spits upon clear gold, and hills that reek with the dust of riches.

"He seeks fares for the Gold Bug," scoffed Jose, "He sails soon, I theenk, for Seattle, yes?"

"To-night with the tide," the man nodded. "You may be right, Jose—but Wilkes is a straight-speaking man."

"And a pirate, I swear!" Jose shouted laughingly. "Woe be to him who breeng his Alaska gold thees way on the Gold Bug of Captain Wilkes!"

"They were to hang him once," the *señor* said slowly, a slight smirk of humor about his bluish lips. "They planned it well because of this man Howland from the East."

"I well remember," another of the three spoke for the first time. "'Twas because of the Barb claim, one o' the first we knew of here in Frisco—a queer story that! Good it would be to know the facts!"

"The facts," Jose blatted brazenly, "are well known! Wilkes he tried hard indeed to steal the gold of this Howland man! He fought heem on the ship—he trailed heem on the shore—final he keeled heem—but he nevair learn one thing!"

And again Jose laughed delightedly at the foiling of the good Captain Wilkes of the schooner Gold Bug.

The third man of the original group waved silently at the barkeep, and there was another service of the vile liquor which so tore at Jerk's throat. Yet he was fascinated, in a sense by this border talk. The wealth of words, the bragging of millions, the ceaseless talk of gold, gold, gold, enthralled him.

"Howland," the buyer of the drinks said calmly, "was a smart man—and a brave one, I say."

"Who see heem with gold?" the *señor* asked shrewdly. "There is moch talk—there was no proof."

"I believe he had a claim in Alaska," the speaker said steadily. "Wilkes would never mistake such a thing and go to the lengths of murder to find them wrong!

"Somewhere in that frozen hell to the North lies a claim as rich as all California! This Barb. Some time the story will come

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out. A man like Howland, even though dead he be, has left a trail for him smart enough to find and follow it!"

"Once it ees said," the *señor* scowled slowly, "that while all men watch heem here, he calmly send by mail the very thing they seek! The map an' plan, what he do weeth the gold is nevair known, though it be said that he banked eet an' sent East money in packages like soap."

"There was that skipper of the Trailer," suggested the third man calmly. "He made many trips around the Horn, but never a trip after Howland died.

"It is said that Howland made him rich for the delivery of money and papers—but all is talk!" He broke off suddenly. "Talk, talk, talk! However," as though in compromise with himself, "damned if I don't believe the tales of the Barb and Howland!"

More drinks came. Jerk felt that he was breaking into the world of which he had dreamed. None of these men worked; he could see that. To live this sort of life suited him.

He would join them and make of them his friends, and after a time, when the opportunity came for them to see how well he could plan, he would become a leader among them. The little pistol in his sleeve would make him great!

He smiled suddenly, at realization that the law was aiding him to greatness. Once let the law come and, ratlike, Jerk could become great by defeating it with his wits. While there was no law, and men like these Brownies rode roughshod over all men, Jerk could do but little!

He called for a drink on his own score. He was pleased at the chance meeting with Jose which had so ushered him into the new world.

It was evident that he was in company of men who demanded and received from other men considerations above the normal. His mere presence among them on such a basis marked him, he saw, as one to be granted attention.

The drinks came and elbows crooked. At that exact moment a word for the *señor* brought a snarl of hate to Jose's lips.

"Colonel Raynor heemself!" the *señor* whispered, his glittering eyes fastened upon the door of the bar.

Jerk whirled in fear. Here was the law which he had violated, and he was in a world where men did not run from law but stood and fought it.

He set his glass on the bar with a sharp rap. His hands jerked nervously, and the right wrist of him crooked outward as though clearing a passage for the secret gun in his sleeve.

Raynor was a big man, his shoulders square and his chin, wreathed in a well-trimmed beard, showed with the firmness of a Gibraltar. At his hips he wore two heavy guns.

On the left front of his leather vest glistened a silver star of legal authority. A sudden hush fell over the assemblage in the Golden Nugget at his appearance.

Jerk watched the man as he looked around the place, his hands hanging calmly at his sides, his eyes cold and steady in their search. Behind Raynor were several other men, and one of them spoke now, eagerly, huskily, his voice wavering in excitement.

"There they are, colonel—those two young fellers—damn 'em!"

Jerk swallowed hard as he saw a soiled and trembling hand pointing toward Jose and himself. He recognized the owner of the hand as one of the waiting men along the trail, one who had trusted his money to Jose for the buying of a wagon with which to start back for what he called God's country.

Raynor was walking toward them now. Jose stood quite still, his lips drawn back in the sneering smile. Raynor reached him and spoke, shifting his eyes also to Jerk and including him in the words.

"You'll be walkin' along o' me, gents," he said firmly. "I'm arrestin' you fer swindlin' these tenders—and you," he said directly to Jose, "as a member o' the gang o' Brownies that killed three wagon drivers last week."

"You theenk you arrest!" Jose sneered angrily, his hot temper carrying him to heights of courage unexpected in him. "But you theenk bad theenk, Señor Colonel!"

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"Come along!" Raynor ordered sharply. "I'll have none o' yore damn greaser threats with me!"

Raw hatred leaped into Jose's eyes. His elbows crooked and his fingers jerkily assumed a talonlike tensity beside the butt of the gun at his hip. Raynor smiled ever so slightly, said coolly:

"I called you-all greaser, Jose—I meant it. I'm partial toward 'em in my killin's, too!"

The man seemed intent upon enraging Jose. It was as though he sought to bring matters to a head and shoot it out with one of the leaders of the infamous Brownies. As if by magic a path had cleared in the line of shooting that impended. A deathly silence had fallen upon the Golden Nugget.

Into Jerk's inflamed mind came visions of the leadership of which he had dreamed. Colonel Raynor was a great man in San Francisco at that time; he was a leader of the forces that stood for law and order, and had willingly taken upon himself the hazardous task of establishing both in this frontier town.

The strangeness of things, the weird psychologies which had wafted Jerk about upon their impulses, coupled with the raw and fiery whisky the bandit had drunk, acted.

A combined fear and cowardice flamed into a sudden terror that called for release from impending arrest. He knew that he might be hanged as a Brownie along with Jose Capadon.

Raynor was not looking at him. The officer was watching the tense Jose. The little pistol in Jerk's sleeve seemed alive, palpitant. It was so easy!

Fired by a sudden impulse of hatred, fear, and a desire for fame, he snapped his wrist and felt the butt of the little secure in his palm. So silently, so quickly was the thing done, and so unexpected was the move, that few men in the place realized whence came the sharp report of the shot Jerk fired.

Raynor spun under the impact of the ball, a look of anguished surprise crossing his square face. Jose uttered a catlike cry of exultation and leaped at the stricken man.

His high boot, heavy with the leather and the length of riding heel, crashed into the officer's stomach just in time to prevent the wounded man from getting his own weapons free.

Raynor collapsed, a ghastly pallor engulfing his face and a half coherent moan of anguish twisting his lips. Jerk stood quite still, his hands darting back and forth incessantly, his tongue sweeping white lips and his eyes burning treacherously.

In the front of the Golden Nugget, near the door, one of the men who had been robbed on the trail uttered a terrified oath and darted into the street calling at the top of his lungs for help, for the riders of the law who rode under Raynor.

Calmly, him who Jose had addressed as *señor* stepped to Jerk's side and whispered: "Queeck! Get to Captain Wilkes's boat, the Gold Bug. He weel unnerstand. Jose—go too! Thees damn hot youth has brought war! Run for it!"

Jose, the daredevil smile of hatred about his lips, caught Jerk's arm, and the two ran behind the bar and leaped through a window to the outside. Jose was nimble, and knew his way. Jerk followed at his heels, his breath coming in choking gasps, his tongue dancing upon his dried lips.

Behind them that section of the town was in a furor. Men shouted and cursed, horse traders waxed suddenly energetic in an attempt to keep their animals from breaking free in the excitement which prevailed.

Down one narrow lane appeared three riders, revolvers in hand and hell blazing in their eyes. They wore stars of the kind that had adorned Raynor's leather vest. They rode to the Golden Nugget and found their chief shot through the lung and writhing in agony.

In the time that they were mustering men for the finding of Jose and Jerk, the two criminals slipped unmolested to the docks at the older end of town, and there, under Jose's guidance, found the Gold Bug and Captain Wilkes, who planned, to sail for Seattle on the already flowing tide.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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TOMBOY DAYS

TO farmers driving into town,
With wives in sweet, fresh lawn,
I'd shout the lusty greeting:
"Do you care if I hang on?"
They always smiled and slowed the team
While I climbed up behind,
And cautioned me: "Don't you get hurt
You little Tomboy—mind."

The proudest memory of them all
That lingers in my heart,
Was driving Mr. Farley's mules
That hauled the sprinkling cart.
We'd leave the lower crossing
With levers hard pressed down
And sprinkle, north on Main Street,
Away to Fletcher Town!

In all these intervening years
I've never known such pride
As driving back to fill the cart,
At Mr. Farley's side.
He'd tell me all about the mules,
How Jeff was "apt to kick"
And never had he given Jude
A solitary lick.

And when he let me hold the whip
He never failed to say,
"Be careful now, don't hit the mules
They're pretty spry to-day."
And when we passed the grocery store,
Disloyal to my trust,
If I were mad at Ella
Her groceries got the dust.

But when we came to Kearney's
The chance was always slim,
To have my dearest wish come true,
To wit: To sprinkle Jim!
I always hoped to shower him
Until his clothes were limp,
But never did I sprinkle
My contemporary imp.

Too soon these happy Tomboy days
Were turned to "grown up" years,
And looking back I often weep
Old-fashioned homesick tears—
My secret consolation is,
The fact, that to this day
I play a G harmonica
The old Missouri way.

Selma Hall.

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Black Mutiny

By JUDSON PHILIPS

Author of "The Betrayal," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

HAMILTON tossed the letter across his desk to Digby Smith, then leaned back in his heavy mahogany chair and blew a cloud of cigar smoke toward the ceiling.

"See what you make of it," he grunted.

Digby picked up the letter and read:

JOHN R. HAMILTON, ESQ.,
President, Hamilton Import and Export Company, San Francisco, Cal.

Dear Mr. Hamilton—For a long time I have wondered whether I should write this letter to you or not. My daughter says I am an old fool—not disrespectfully, you understand, sir—and I sometimes think she's right.

Years in this country are apt to do queer things to a man, Mr. Hamilton, what with the heat and the hellish monotony of it. Yet it sort of gets you and holds you. That's why I've stuck to this post for thirty-five years.

When I discuss the situation here with my daughter she says I'm romancing—just an old-timer wishing for the old days when there was adventure at every turn. She says I'm looking for trouble. But, damn it, sir, *I know these blacks!* What's more, I'm too old for romance now. Frankly, sir, the way things are going here has me beaten.

Just checking over the reports in your office you can't help but see that in the last five years there's been a gradual decrease in our export of copra. It's been so gradual that you may not have noticed it, but the boat that's bringing you this letter has just half the amount of stuff in her hold that she should take from us.

I've had it out with Lutu, my black foreman. He lays it to the fact that the coconut trees aren't as fruitful as they used to be. He says the beetle pest gets worse every year. He hasn't enough men to fight it. But he shifts on his feet when he talks and he won't look at me.

He's lying, Mr. Hamilton. I know this game well enough to be certain that the trouble is subtler than that. It's the men themselves. They get more and more restless, as the days go by. They're drinking more than I ever knew natives to drink.

When I first came here I used to see a native drunk during some festival—one of their dancing orgies—but never any other time. Now I see it every day. I've tried to put a stop to it, but it's hopeless.

Lebeare, the Frenchman who runs the supply post here, swears that he isn't dispensing liquor. He says some of the Chinese coolies who are working on contract at the dock have discovered a way to make alcohol out of coconuts. He says it's stronger and better than grain alcohol. He says the natives are getting their drink from them. Wherever they get it, it's raising the devil with them. These blacks can't stand drink.

Then there's another thing which I haven't mentioned to my daughter. There have been at least six definite attempts on my life. I can't prove it, but I know it. These natives are crafty and sly. They're the best liars

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in the world, and they're clever. Near accidents—that's what I've been up against. It's only by the grace of God that I'm alive now. Perhaps you'll call this an old man's fancy—but I know!

We're up against it here when it comes to discipline. There are only six whites on the island besides myself and my daughter. It's only by diplomacy that we keep the upper hand. The natives could wipe us out in fifteen minutes if it weren't for fear of the British gunboats that blow in unexpectedly.

Major Cornsweet, who runs the "government" end, is a dangerous man for this position. He's quick-tempered and iron-fisted. If it hadn't been for me and Dr. Trelawny, the medical missionary, we should have had trouble before now.

We can't afford to antagonize the natives, because we're dependent on them, not only for our business, but for our lives. Cornsweet, if he had his own way, would have 'em flogged in the center of the town when they go wrong. He doesn't understand the sullen, vengeful temperament of these blacks.

Cornsweet's assistant, Overton, is an inconsequential ninny who does nothing but drink and pay unwelcome attentions to my daughter. He is of no consequence whatever and would be no help if a crisis should arise. Lebeare, the Frenchman of whom I spoke, is also unreliable. He knows which side his bread's buttered on and he'd do anything to save his own hide.

Old Tom Healy, who is boss at the harbor, has been in these South Seas longer than I have. He has sensed the unrest in the air and warned me of it. He's inclined to put the blame for it on the only other white that I haven't mentioned.

This fellow is a derelict Englishman who dropped off here about eight months ago. No one knows anything about him, but I suspect that he is a cashiered army officer. There's something of the military in his bearing, and when he's sober—which is very infrequently—he has the air of a man who has been a gentleman. But this is all guesswork.

He is constantly drunk, and spends most of his time in the woods away from the town, coming back only to replenish his supply of liquor, it seems. He earns his money by helping about the docks when an occasional boat puts in.

Healy suspects that this fellow has gone native—raised some sort of hell among the blacks—and that their resentment has spread to all of us whites, and to me in particular, as their direct boss. But this is only conjecture.

Frankly, Mr. Hamilton, I am asking to be relieved. My daughter is now twenty years old. She has been here all her life, except for an occasional trip to Sydney or Melbourne. It's time she saw something of her own country. Moreover, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that these blacks might be diabolical enough to strike at me through her. God forbid!

I shall expect you to send a younger and more capable man to fill my post on the next boat. I should be glad to stay on and show him the ropes for a bit.

Sincerely,

JOHN CONVERSE.

P. S.—I have reread this letter, Mr. Hamilton, and I realize that I have not mentioned any possible cause for the situation here.

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That's the very devil of the whole thing, sir. I can give no earthly reason for it.

We have treated the natives well. Things went on smoothly for the last twenty-five years. Until now everything has been peaceful and quiet. Personally, I can't believe that this derelict Englishman is at the bottom of it. Believe me, Mr. Hamilton, there's something much subtler than that, something that an old-timer like me, versed in all the lore of this country, can't get at. If I could locate the source of the trouble I could stamp it out in no time.

Cornsweet says the cat-o'-nine-tails will cure a sulky black, but I know better. There's something afoot that I am no longer young enough to handle. Something that makes me afraid for myself and my daughter—and for your interests here.

Digby Smith put the long letter down on Hamilton's desk and looked at his chief with a broad grin.

"Sounds pleasant," he said. "When do I leave?"

Hamilton, who had been looking thoughtfully out of the office window while Digby read, swung around sharply. His cigar was clamped tightly between his fine, white teeth.

"You think it's a lot of moonshine?"

Digby nodded.

"Just an old fellow who's living in the past, I should judge from his letter. The loneliness has got the better of him, and the natives have taken advantage of the fact that he's no longer able to keep a tight grip. Wouldn't you say so, sir?"

For a moment Hamilton paused, and then he shook his head.

"No, I wouldn't," he answered. "Let me tell you about John Converse. To begin with, he's not an old man. Just my age—fifty-five. He knows that country inside out. He's the best man we've ever had in our South Sea service. His wife died of fever out on one of the islands, and he stayed on with his kid.

"Most fellows want to leave after a year or two, but John Converse had lived there with his wife when they were first married and had raised his daughter there. It's home to him, and you can bet your last dollar that he wouldn't suggest leaving unless it was getting mighty hot. No, I think there's something in what he says."

"But he doesn't say anything!" Digby pointed out. "The blacks don't work as hard as they used to, and they drink more. Just the result of contact with civilization, I should say."

"What about the near accidents?" asked Hamilton.

"Imagination. He and this old codger Healy have got together and built up a bugaboo."

Hamilton referred for a moment to a sheaf of papers on his desk.

"We export copra from a dozen islands in the South Seas. At Manuia we have huge coconut groves that we leased for fifty years from the British government. That's where Converse is. For years that has been one of our most profitable holdings. But as Converse says, in the last five years the output has been cut in half. Now that may be the result of native contact with civilization, *but*"—and Hamilton pointed to the papers in his hand with the end of his cigar—"in our other places the output has been nearly doubled! How do you account for that, young fellow? These other places, especially the American holdings, have been thoroughly civilized. The Cook Islands, in which Manuia is located, are the least civilized of all the lot."

Digby grinned again. "Seems to knock my theory full of holes," he admitted.

"Furthermore," continued Hamilton, "I trust Converse implicitly. He has never been an alarmist. Something's decidedly wrong at Manuia or he'd never have written that letter."

"Have you any idea as to what it might be, sir?"

Hamilton lit a fresh cigar and smoked for a moment in silence.

"Those South Sea natives are a funny lot," he said finally. "I worked among 'em for years, so I should know. It may be that Cornsweet, this British major in command there, has antagonized them. It may be some internal religious upheaval. It may be—"

Digby cut in eagerly:

"This derelict Englishman—couldn't he be employed by some rival company, sent there to disrupt things so that you would become willing to release your holdings?"

"If he is—" Hamilton's face assumed

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a grim expression. "That's what I want you to find out, if you decide to go, Digby."

"Decide, sir?"

"I won't order any man to a dangerous post," said Hamilton. "I think you might straighten things out down there, but you don't *have* to go. It's up to you."

"When does the next boat sail?" asked Smith.

II.

FOUR days after John Hamilton's interview with Digby Smith, the Hamilton steamer, Corsicana, sailed out through the Golden Gate for the distant port of Manuia, carrying Digby as her one and only passenger.

The Corsicana was not a fast ship, and the journey promised to take about two weeks. To Digby the voyage was one continuous delight. It had been some years since that young man had had anything in the way of a vacation, and he managed to enjoy this one to the fullest extent, lolling in a deck chair under the scorching sun until he was browned to a crisp.

Digby Smith's association with Hamilton had begun in a peculiar fashion. Back from the war, Digby, like so many others, had been unable to settle himself into any position that suited him. The inaction of a desk job drove him to distraction.

Being something of a gambler at heart, he had finally given up any serious search for work, and began to spend his time at his university club, playing bridge or poker. At times he prospered; at other times there was an alarming number of I O U's out against him.

But in the main there was enough uncertainty as to the source of his next meal to keep Digby amused. Anything was better than routine! He had seen enough of that in the army.

One night John Hamilton, on from the West, sat in at the same poker game with Digby. For awhile the younger man won, but as the evening became early morning Digby began to wriggle a bit in his chair.

His pile of chips had dwindled. The men in the game were strangers to him, and he could not very well offer them promises.

A final hand in which he felt he stood a better than even chance to win. The betting simmered down to a duel between him and Hamilton. At last Digby looked up with a smile.

"I'll have to drop out, sir," he said. "Couldn't cover that last bet if I lost."

For a long moment John Hamilton studied Digby's square jaw and his frank blue eyes.

"I'll make you a proposition, young man," he suggested. "If you win, well and good. If you lose, you go back to California with me to-morrow and take a job that I have in mind."

Digby hesitated.

"It's a man's job. Not one for any one a trifle white-livered," observed Hamilton dryly.

Digby's eyes flashed, and he held out his hand.

"Done!" he snapped.

The next morning Digby Smith was westward bound.

Four years followed in which Digby was completely satisfied. He traveled, he worked, he fought for John Hamilton. He had found his niche in life.

Hamilton became more like an older brother, a companion in arms, than anything else. He had lived a life of adventure himself, and he never gave a thought to personal danger.

He worried considerably more about his workers than he did about himself. It was for that reason that he had hesitated to send Digby to Manuia, although he knew that the younger man would jump at the prospect of adventure.

He knew, too, that he could trust Digby, and that if any man in his organization could get at the heart of the trouble on the island, Digby was that man.

Hamilton had come to the dock to see Digby off.

"You're playing a lone hand," he said. "If you get in a mess you'll have to get out of it yourself. Get every scrap of information you can from Converse before he leaves. Keep me informed of any developments. And remember, old son, I'm counting on you to straighten things out."

A silent handshake, and Digby jumped

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into the tender which was waiting to take him to the Corsicana.

It was not until they had been nearly a week at sea that Digby got under the skin of Captain McLeish, the dour old skipper of the Corsicana. McLeish had been sailing the South Seas before Digby was born, and he was just a trifle crusty in his dealings with "greenhorns."

But one night he asked Digby to join him in the chart room after the evening mess hour.

"I can remember," McLeish told him, "when it wouldn't have been safe fer a feller of your complexion to set foot on these islands."

"How so?" inquired Digby.

"Your hair ain't exactly brick red," observed the captain, "but it has a reddish tinge. They tell stories about red heads out there that wouldn't of been cheerin' a few years back."

"What sort of stories?"

"Head hunters," explained McLeish. "A whaler put in at one of them Cook Islands years ago. One of the crew was an Irish lad, a little redder than you, no doubt. They went ashore for water, and the natives treated 'em grand. But just as they was leavin', the chief called aside this Irish kid and started palaverin' with him. Before the rest of the crew could say 'Jack Robinson,' the chief knocks this kid for a loop, and slices off his head with an ax.

"The rest of the crew wasn't armed, and the natives chased 'em to their boat. After that the other tribes got jealous of this red head stickin' on a pole outside the chief's hut, and there was a premium on 'em. Red headed fellers stayed on shipboard after that."

Digby gulped at his drink, while McLeish chuckled.

"Those days is pretty well done for, though," continued the captain. "Things has got pretty tame out there nowadays. Missionaries has made a bloomin' Sunday school out of them islands."

"There seems to be some sort of trouble at Manuia, though," observed Digby.

McLeish looked shrewdly at his passenger for a moment before he replied.

"I can't quite make it out," he said finally. "I had a talk with old Tom Healy on the last trip. He has charge of the loadin' and unloadin' of cargoes at Manuia. He's been in and around them islands most of his life. The last couple of times I've been there he's said there was trouble in the air. At first I laughed at him, but to tell you the truth, Mr. Smith, the last time I was there I got a whiff of it myself."

The captain puffed reflectively on his pipe.

"What sort of whiff?"

"It's hard to tell," said the captain slowly. "It was the blacks, I think. They didn't act the same. They was more sullen and grouchy than ever. It took 'em nearly twice as long to load the ship as it should have. Got my goat a little, for I wouldn't stay in that hole a day longer than I had to. Manuia's not the place for me. No women!"

Digby laughed. "That's a tragedy, captain. But I thought Converse had a daughter?"

"And a fine girl she is," admitted the captain. "Not the kind for the likes of me. And if I was Converse I'd get her out of Manuia before long. It's no place for a woman. No companionship for her; not a young man in the place, except a bird named Overton. He's assistant to the major there, and a worthless, lily-livered fop, if I know anything."

"Just what are Overton's duties at Manuia?" Digby asked.

"Secretary to the major," snapped McLeish. "Never did a day's work in his life. Fingers like a woman." The captain grinned maliciously. "He don't shake hands with me any more. My grip's a little strong for him."

Digby smiled. He remembered with some dismay the crushing handshake McLeish had given him when they first met.

"We got something on board for him now," added McLeish. "A piano! Imagine a bird wanting a piano at Manuia! Ordered it from Frisco, he did. If you stay in Manuia long, Mr. Smith, you'll grow to share my opinion, I think. Just why the government should send that kind of a fellow to a wild place like Manuia is

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hard to guess. Back in the States he'd be a librarian, probably!"

It was evident that the captain had little use for a man with artistic bents.

"Well," said Digby, as he tossed off the last of his drink, "Converse and his daughter will probably go back with you, and then Overton will have no one to court but yours truly. I doubt he'll thrive on that."

During the rest of the trip Digby and the captain became the best of friends, but Digby was able to learn practically nothing more about the situation at Manuia. The captain could only say that he had himself sensed a vague foreboding of trouble. Like Converse, he could not put his finger on it or assign any reason for it. It was just "in the air."

When the Corsicana came into view of Manuia, Digby had the sensation of entering upon an adventure. The harbor does not permit the tying up at a wharf, and several hundred feet from the shore the Corsicana dropped anchor. The island itself looked to Digby like one vast expanse of mountainous forest.

He could see no signs of life except a few scattered figures on the beach, and an odd-looking boat which had put out from shore for the Corsicana.

In the bow of this boat, which was being paddled by natives, stood a white man. He was dressed in canvas trousers, a shirt and a pith helmet. This, no doubt, was Converse coming to greet him.

But McLeish dispelled this idea.

"It's Dr. Trelawny," he said. "The only preacher I'd ever give a damn for. Religion's practical with him. No hocus-pocus theories."

A few minutes later Dr. Trelawny was climbing up the rope ladder which had been lowered over the Corsicana's side.

Digby liked him instinctively. He was a tall, rangy man, with a face which told of a hard, difficult life. It was lined and stern, yet when he smiled a greeting at Digby it lighted up charmingly.

"It is a delight to meet you, Mr. Smith," he said. "We so seldom see any one from our world. I am eager to talk with you."

"I hope we shall have many opportunities," answered Digby.

"I hope so," agreed the doctor. Then his face took on a grave expression, and he turned to the captain. "I should like to have a word with you and Mr. Smith privately," he said.

"Certainly, doctor. And if you're not above a little nip of real liquor and maybe a good cigar—"

Trelawny smiled faintly. "You're generous, captain. But first I have news of the utmost importance."

McLeish led the way to the chart room, and presently the three men were alone.

Trelawny turned to Digby.

"I want to explain why Converse isn't here to greet you," he said. "The fact is, Converse is ill. Very ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," said Digby. "I had hoped he and his daughter could return with the Corsicana. Is it fever?"

Trelawny looked squarely into Digby's eyes as he answered.

"We are calling it fever," he said. "I have told the truth to no one. Not even his daughter. It is not necessary to alarm her too much."

"But what is the truth, doctor?"

"Converse has been poisoned. Deliberately poisoned," said Trelawny.

"God in heaven!" exclaimed McLeish. "Will he get well?"

"That is my profound hope, captain." But there was a decided note of doubt in Trelawny's voice.

III.

In the silence that followed Trelawny's announcement Digby became suddenly aware of the stifling heat in the chart room. Until now on the trip the movement of the ship, the faint sea breeze, had kept him from a full realization of the stuffiness of the atmosphere. Now, as the Corsicana lay at anchor, he felt its frightful oppressiveness.

McLeish broke the silence.

"You said 'deliberately' poisoned, doctor? Do you suspect any one?"

Trelawny shrugged.

"No one and every one," he answered.

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"Margo, Converse's daughter, does all the cooking for him. It couldn't have come through his food. But out in the grove where he might have quenched his thirst from the water pail or from coconut milk—"

Digby wiped his forehead with his handkerchief.

"Is it any recognizable poison?" he asked.

"That is the difficulty," admitted Trelawny. "Our equipment is of the crudest sort. Really just first-aid stuff. I have no way of telling. I'm just working in the dark. Therein lies the danger, for I may be failing to treat him properly for his ailment. If I knew what I was fighting!"

Trelawny's lips tightened and he looked away. It was evident that he had been going through a strenuous time. The relief of being able to talk to some one about it was apparent.

"Look here, Dr. Trelawny," Digby cut in, "I've come out to Manuia on a sort of wild-goose chase. There seems to be some very definite trouble, and yet no one can tell me what it is. Perhaps since Converse wrote to Mr. Hamilton you've learned more. Can you tell me what it's all about?"

Trelawny drew a pipe from his trousers pocket and lit it before he replied.

"It is the most peculiar situation I have ever encountered in my whole experience," he said, puffing a cloud of smoke toward the cabin roof. "As you say, it is indefinite. But unquestionably one thing stands out. All sorts of attempts have been made to get rid of Converse. At first these attempts were rather crude and ineffectual; this last one is much more deliberate—much cleverer.

"In addition to these thrusts at Converse himself, there has been a very obvious and partially successful effort to corrupt the men working for him. The output of copra has dwindled appreciably.

"There are mutterings and grumblings among the natives unpleasantly like the days when mutiny was not an uncommon thing. I know the signs, Mr. Smith, for I have served in these parts for twenty years. To a newcomer like you, to Major Cornsweet, who's in charge here and new to this sort of thing, the moods of these negroes mean little. But to me—frankly, I'm in a funk about it.

"Understand, I'm not afraid for myself, but for Converse—and especially for Margo. We would have no means of successfully fighting a rebellion. We're just a handful of whites, and"—here Trelawny paused and his brow knitted into a dark scowl—"and some of us not too damned courageous."

"You mean Overton?" grunted the captain.

"Frankly, yes," admitted the doctor. "And not only Overton, but Lebeare. That Frenchman is a slick customer, but his own precious hide is sacred beyond anything else. Sometimes I wonder if he may not be at the bottom of our whole trouble."

"I'd break the damned frog in half if you had anything on him," growled McLeish. "Never liked him anyway."

"But we haven't anything on him," Trelawny pointed out, "or any one else, for that matter. I can't do any better than make guesses in the dark. Lebeare and Converse had a row over the distribution of liquor among the natives. Converse was convinced that Lebeare was giving it out, and Lebeare insisted that he wasn't. They had some pretty hot words on the subject, and there's been bad blood between them ever since.

"Lebeare is the sort of chap who would never drop a grudge. But I can't believe that any man would carry an effort at revenge to such a serious point—revenge for a few ill-tempered words. It's not reasonable—even in a rat like Lebeare."

McLeish shook his head. "It's funny none of these things happen when I'm here."

"It's not funny at all," contradicted Trelawny. "The natives know that you have a crew of men here who could arm themselves quickly and put up a good fight. It's been the fear of a ship putting in at a crucial moment that has saved us so far. Of that I'm convinced.

"And that reminds me of another important point. It has come to our notice that several of the natives are in pos-

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session of firearms. That is an extremely dangerous thing for us."

"But how do they get them?" asked Digby. "Surely they're not for sale at the store?"

"Not for sale," said the doctor significantly. "Lebeare isn't allowed to import firearms—and yet some of the natives have them."

"Can't you examine the goods that are delivered to him?"

"When we discovered that some of the natives had guns, Major Cornsweet flew into a rage and had Lebeare's place ransacked from roof to cellar. Net result—nothing! Nothing but further ill feeling toward the rest of us on Lebeare's part."

"It all seems like a Chinese puzzle," said Digby. "No one knows just what the trouble is, who's causing it, or why. Personally I'm anxious to get ashore and have a first-hand look at the problem myself."

"The best idea," agreed Trelawny. "I want you to have a talk with Converse—while it's still possible. Since you've come to take over his post, he'll have a good deal of importance to tell you, I suspect."

A few minutes later, following orders by the captain, a boat was lowered over the side of the Corsicana, and Trelawny and Digby were rowed ashore. The captain had duties on board ship which would detain him for another hour or two, he explained.

"If it were not for the grave problem at hand," said Trelawny on the way to shore, "you might enjoy your first sight of this country, Mr. Smith. To me it is the most beautiful spot in the world. I've never been a man for the cities myself. This is nature in its crudest form, and I love it."

Digby was inclined to believe that Trelawny did not exaggerate. Before leaving San Francisco he had read all the available literature and seen all the pictures of the South Seas that he could get his hands on. But Manuia surpassed anything he had imagined.

The vividness of the colors impressed him more than anything else. The intense blue of the sky and the water; the green of the foliage, a green which only one who has seen the tropics can visualize.

Back from the white sand of the shore rose the mountain, sloping gradually and then rising abruptly; a mass of jungle growth to its very tip. It seemed too peaceful, too lovely a place to harbor the dark murmurings of revolt and sinister plotting.

Trelawny apparently read Digby's thought.

"There's another side to it," he said. "One that you may get all too soon. The heat; the deadly monotony of seeing the same few people day after day, week after week; of eating tinned salmon and tinned beef until the sight of a can opener turns your stomach.

"And no women. No matter what sort of a chap a fellow is, he misses the society of women. We've been lucky here. We've had Margo since she was a baby. She's been the one bright spot in our lives. It will be devilish hard without her."

"Aren't you painting the dark side a bit heavily?" asked Digby.

"Because I don't want you to have any illusions, my boy. Frankly, the magic of the place is in my bones. When I tell other people that I wouldn't leave if I could, they laugh at me. But when I sit on the porch of my shack on one of the gorgeous moonlight nights we have here, smell the smells that I've grown to associate with my life, hear the chanting of native muisc in the distance, feel the caressing night breeze after a scorching day in the grove somewhere, then I know that I love it. To some the nights are lonely. To me they are filled with a mystery and a bewitching beauty that I can't resist."

As the small boat approached the beach Digby saw a short, stocky, white-bearded old man walking down to meet them.

"Healy," explained Trelawny. "Has charge of the boat loading. Bosses a bunch of Chinese coolies that do the work. He's something of a character, having lived in these parts for God knows how long."

As Digby jumped from the boat to the beach, Healy greeted him with a sour expression on his face.

"And it's sorry I am to see you, Mr. Smith," he announced glumly.

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"Not as bad as that, I hope!" laughed Digby.

"This is no place for a man that doesn't know this country," said Healy, with a shake of his head. "You'll be in for a hot time, I'm thinking. None of us will see many more moons if them blacks keep getting riled. There's storm clouds ahead, Mr. Smith, mark my words."

"Come off, Tom," Trelawny chided. "You're a pessimist. Perhaps Mr. Smith will clear things up for us. He'll have a fresh viewpoint. We've been parboiled under this hot sun too long, Tom, and I sometimes think we imagine things that don't exist."

"No imagination in that dose of poison some one fed John," the Irishman said grimly. "No imagination in them sullen black faces up in the grove. No, doctor, it's lucky we'll be if we see another rainy season, I'm thinkin'."

"In any event, Tom, it's not a very hospitable greeting you're offering the new chief," rejoined Trelawny, striving to keep the conversation light. "Get a couple of those China boys of yours to bring up Mr. Smith's luggage to the bungalow."

"And when you're in a more cheerful mood," added Digby, "come up and have a drink with me. There's a great deal you can tell me about the island, Mr. Healy."

"I'll not be cheerful," muttered Healy, "but I'll have the drink, and thank you for it." And he stalked off to get his men for the luggage.

IV.

THE village of Manuia was even more primitive than Digby had imagined. Dr. Trelawny led him up from the beach into a sort of clearing at the edge of the wood, which was really all there was to the village. Scattered here and there were thatched huts in front of which naked black children played in the dust.

Once or twice as they walked on, Digby detected a dark face peering out at him from within a shadowy hut. In the center of the clearing, three or four hundred yards from the beach, was a large building, which was obviously the trading post.

It was made of rough hewn slabs with a thatched roof in dilapidated condition. It suggested a slovenly owner, for it was surrounded by scraps of paper, broken crates from which goods had been removed, and odds and ends of trash.

As they approached the store they passed several groups of natives, tall, powerful-looking men, who were talking excitedly, and evidently about Digby. They looked at him curiously, and gesticulated.

Digby put it down to imagination, but he felt that there was something hostile in their attitude.

Farther along their path they encountered another person, whom Digby immediately guessed was the derelict Englishman Converse had mentioned in his letter. He was a tall, slender man, raggedly dressed.

He stood leaning against a tree, a cigarette drooping from between half parted lips, peering at Digby and the doctor from under a battered sun helmet.

If he had shaved within a fortnight, his scrubby growth of beard showed no evidence of it. As they drew abreast, Digby heard him singing under his breath in a thick, alcoholic voice:

> "An' when I die,
> Don' bury me at all.
> Jus' pickle my bones—"

His voice drifted off as they passed him. There was no sign of greeting, no indication that he had ever laid eyes on the doctor before. A queer person.

"Another of our little enigmas," laughed Trelawny, when they were out of earshot. "Nobody knows much about him. His name is Grant, and he dropped in on us about eight months ago. He spends most of his time in the bush, but inevitably puts in an appearance when a ship arrives. He works along with Healy's Chinese in the loading and unloading, and spends nearly everything he earns for bad liquor. An unsavory person, to put it mildly."

"Not a very sociable cuss," remarked Digby. "He acted as if he had never seen you before."

"It's his usual manner," said the doctor. "We've become accustomed to it here. By the way, before going to Converse's bunga-

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low, I'm going to stop off at the post and have you meet Lebeare. I should like to suggest that you try to establish a friendly relationship with him. It is possible that he knows more than he cares to tell. His enmity toward Converse has been a distinct drawback in the past."

"I should certainly put my foot down, just as Converse did, if I suspected him of trafficking with the natives," said Digby.

"And quite rightly, Mr. Smith," agreed Trelawny. "However, John's mistake was in making accusations before he had definite proof. If it is not impertinent, I should suggest your treading more carefully."

Lebeare's store was a thing of some wonder to Digby when he entered it. Nothing in it seemed to be whole.

The chairs and tables which were scattered about the center of the main room were all of them broken and dilapidated. On and under the tables were broken glasses and bottles. Previous breakage and been swept into the corners, which had received a considerable accumulation.

On the sagging shelves and hung from hooks about the walls was every conceivable sort of merchandise, canned foods, musical instruments, tobacco, books, tools of all sorts, mirrors, pots and pans, cheap perfume, hats, bright colored chintzes, beads.

In one corner of the room the proprietor had built up what passed for a bar. Behind it was a broken mirror. A calendar for three years back hung in one corner, decorated with the picture of a semi-nude woman.

A wooden footrail had been built in front of the bar, and it was well worn; in fact, like everything else in the place, it was broken down in one spot.

In another corner, as Digby and Trelawny entered, was the proprietor himself, sitting in a rickety Morris chair, reading an ancient copy of *Le Rire*. He was a fat little Frenchman with a meticulously waxed mustache. His raven black hair was carefully wetted and brushed.

M. Lebeare jumped up with alacrity as the two entered. He flashed a brilliant smile as he came toward them.

Digby noticed that the lid of his left eye drooped peculiarly, as if the muscles were affected. It gave to Lebeare's countenance the singular effect of having a perpetual roguish wink.

"This is Mr. Smith, who has come to take charge of the grove here," Trelawny explained.

Lebeare's good eye opened wide with surprise.

"Ah, *c'est bien!*" he cried. "We have long need a young man for thees job, M. Smith. The old fellows get the queer ideas, eh, doctaire?" His laugh was not pleasant.

"I have only one idea," said Digby. "That is to clear up the trouble here. Perhaps you can help me, Mr. Lebeare?"

Lebeare shrugged. "I know of no trouble, monsieur."

"I'm glad there's one optimist on the island," laughed Digby. "So far I have heard of nothing but impending disaster." He had no wish to antagonize the Frenchman.

Lebeare looked puzzled for a moment, then an exaggerated expression of sudden understanding spread over his face.

"Monsieur refers to the natives," he said. "It is true. We have felt none too comfortable for some months. No doubt monsieur will quickly straighten that out, eh? A firm young hand is what we have needed here."

"You feel that is nothing more serious than lack of discipline?" asked Digby.

"Monsieur," said Lebeare gravely, "there are a great many idiots in the world, and it seems to me many of them are here at Manuia. *Monsieur le docteur* is a man"—he bowed graciously to Trelawny—"but the rest—poof!"

"Why do you stay here, then?" Digby asked.

For a moment Lebeare's good eye narrowed, and he stared sharply at Digby. Then slowly the bland smile spread over his face again.

"The past is hard to escape, monsieur," he answered. "Here I am safe from those who would pry."

It was Digby's turn to smile. The man's frank admission of a rascally past was a

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bit disarming. But Lebeare was suddenly serious.

"There has been unpleasantness here, monsieur," he went on, "which was not of my own seeking. It is my earnest wish that monsieur and I shall be friends." And he held out his hand.

Out of the store a few moments later Trelawny put into words the thoughts that Digby had been thinking.

"Lebeare is a slippery customer," he said. "You cannot believe a word he says. One moment you like him, the next you mistrust and despise him."

Leading from the clearing which was the village, a much traveled path, as wide as one of our country roads, struck back into the woods. Along this path Digby and Trelawny went.

It ran back into the grove, Trelawny explained, and was the route over which the copra was brought from the grove to the ship. Branching off this main path, a short distance from the store, was a small footpath which led to Converse's bungalow.

At once there was evidence of care and attention. Although there was no effort at design, an obviously cultivated arrangement of plants and flowers lined the way.

"Margo has made this place almost civilized," said Trelawny. "I wonder if any of us will have the energy to keep up the gardens she has started for us here after she has gone?"

As the doctor spoke, there was the sudden sound of some one breaking through the underbrush to the right of the path. Trelawny stopped short and called out: "Who's there?"

His voice evidently startled whoever it was into more violent action. The person redoubled his speed, heading for the deep wood.

Quickly the doctor crashed through the undergrowth, but the foliage was so thick that they could see no one. Farther off they could still hear the man running.

"Some native prowling about out of curiosity?" suggested Digby.

Dr. Trelawny looked puzzled.

"I doubt if a native would make so much racket," he said. "They move through the woods as silently as serpents. I'd almost swear that that was a white man. But who the devil—"

V.

It was night. Digby stood on the porch of the Converse bungalow looking out into the woods, turned silvery by a gorgeous tropic moon.

It was just such a night as Trelawny had described coming in from the ship. There was something magical in the dead stillness, broken only by the faint, rhythmic beating of a native drum somewhere far distant.

Digby sat on the porch rail and lit a cigarette. Things had happened so quickly since he and the doctor had discovered a prowler in the brush as they approached the bungalow early that afternoon, that the significance of that event had faded away.

Margo Converse had come running down the path to tell the doctor that her father had taken a turn for the worse. John Converse was a very sick man. Shortly after their arrival he had fallen into a comatose state from which Trelawny had been unable to revive him.

Any possibility of a talk with him was out of the question, and Digby had wandered aimlessly about the house while the doctor and Margo kept a vigilant watch on Converse. For the time being everything was forgotten but the illness of the father and friend.

Digby had been shown, without ceremony, to a room, where he unpacked his things. It was obvious that Converse would not be able to make the trip back with McLeish, and until such time as he was able to leave the island Digby was to share the bungalow.

He had suggested going to the doctor's or even to Lebeare's, but Margo would not hear of it. The girl had a very positive personality, and, as the doctor whimsically remarked, ruled the island with an iron hand.

Margo had been something of a surprise to Digby. He had expected some sort of a half wild, naïve young thing. Instead he found her a trifle more masculine in her walk, burned a little browner than the

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women he was accustomed to seeing, but otherwise a very modern, quite sophisticated girl.

In spite of the difficulty of the situation, she had greeted him with a casual friendliness which was altogether charming. She had brought clean towels to his room and laughed over the smallness of the quarters in a way which would have indicated that being hostess was an everyday event in her life instead of the rarest.

Digby was completely won to her and already agreed with the doctor that it was unthinkable that she must soon leave.

She had got Digby's supper for him and then they had had an opportunity to chat a bit. He wanted to get her thoughts away from her father, and had tried to discover what sort of talk would interest her.

She was quicker than he had expected. She saw at once that he was floundering around for something that they both knew about.

"We do have books and magazines out here, Mr. Smith," she had said. "Really, I'm not altogether primitive. Perhaps if you wouldn't try so hard—"

They had laughed together then. She was adorable, Digby decided.

Later Major Cornsweet appeared to ask after Converse. He was almost exactly as Digby had pictured him; a big man, too heavy for his height, with a florid complexion which was burned almost beet-red.

He spoke to Margo in choppy phrases, never completing a sentence.

"Heard about your father—rotten luck—hoped he was better—perhaps the heat—devilish the last few days—never get used to the damned climate, anyhow—anything I can do—most awfully glad to help in any way— Ah, Smith—glad to know you—you come at an unfortunate time, eh? Drop over to my shack some time—talk things over—right-o!"

All the time he talked he moved restlessly about, never at ease. He retreated presently reiterating that it was a "damned shame, and all that sort of thing."

"The major is a dear," Margo explained, "but his temper is almost as short as his conversation. He doesn't understand the tropical temperament, I'm afraid."

Digby had then questioned her about Overton, whom he had still to meet. Margo frowned in a perplexed sort of fashion.

"In a tiny community like this one cannot afford to dislike people," she said slowly. "You see every one day in and day out and it would be awfully unfortunate if you couldn't get on with the whole lot. But Dick is trying at moments. His complete lack of seriousness or purpose of any sort puts him at a disadvantage with the other men.

"They think he's a worthless bounder. His attitude toward me is difficult, too. He thinks, I sometimes believe, that the sole reason for the existence of women is to amuse men. He rather tends to bully me—in the matter of monopolizing all my time." Then Margo laughed. "Out here one simply can't plead another social engagement. There just aren't any."

"Perhaps, from now on, there may be a bit of competition," Digby said. And he was pleased at the slight flush that mounted to her cheeks.

Digby snuffed out his cigarette and lit a fresh one. His thoughts strayed back to the time of his arrival at the bungalow.

Who was the man who had been prowling about in the bushes? Trelawny was certain that it was a white man. It couldn't have been Lebeare, for they had just left him. It couldn't have been old Healy or the major. Both of them were above suspicion.

It couldn't have been Overton. He had access to the Converse menage. There was no reason for skulking about in the woods.

Grant, then. Perhaps the mysterious Britisher had followed them from the beach. But for what purpose?

He decided he must have it out with the major. If Grant were back of the trouble with the natives it would be a simple matter to deport him. The major was in absolute authority on the island, and his word was law—in so far as the other whites were concerned, anyhow.

Digby suddenly realized that his thoughts were being distracted by some unusual sound. It was that native drum in the distance. It was much louder now, as if several of them were being pounded in unison.

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The rhythm was faster, too. Presently it was punctuated by staccato shouts.

Digby felt a faint chill of excitement sweep over him. The shouts now developed into a sort of organized chant, a queer, tuneless song.

The drums were louder. Then Digby realized that they were coming closer, beating in a sort of march time. The voices rose and fell monotonously, nearer than before.

Presently through the trees Digby caught a glimpse of a flaming torch of fire. Some one was waving it in fantastic circles. Another sound, the steady tread of many feet.

The door behind Digby opened and Margo came out on the porch. Her face was a shade whiter than it had been, and Digby detected a look of fear in her wide open eyes.

"That's not the usual dance," she said. "I've never heard it before."

She stood beside Digby and peered out into the woods. Suddenly he felt her hand grip his arm.

"Those torches—they mean trouble."

Then above the chanting voices came a succession of several sharp reports from a pistol. Digby saw the flashes through the trees. Some one was firing into the air.

The sound seemed to excite the approaching natives. Several voices broke away from the chanting in loud shouts. The hysterical laughter of a woman floated clear above the babel.

Now they had drawn close enough so that Digby could see a dozen of the burning torches through the trees. The bearers seemed to be in a frenzy, leaping high in the air and shouting.

Trelawny joined the two on the porch. His face was set, and his lips were drawn in a grim line. He was strapping on a revolver holster.

"They're coming along the main path toward the village," he said. "If they turn in here—" He spun the cylinder of his revolver. "Smith, there's a rifle hanging on the wall in the living room. Better get it. And put out the lamps. We'd make excellent targets with the light behind us."

Digby hurried into the house for the gun, blew out the lights, and returned. The natives were almost at the head of the little footpath that led to the bungalow.

In silence they waited to see what would happen. Digby made certain that the rifle was loaded, and threw off the safety device.

The natives were now at the turn. A few disconnected shouts arose. Some one with a torch ran a few steps down the footpath, waving his light.

Digby's hand tightened on the gun. But the main body passed on and the one straggler joined his companions again. The bungalow was not their objective.

Digby put down the rifle against the porch rail and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Then some one came striding along the path from the other direction. It was Cornsweet, his face apoplectic with rage.

"Those filthy natives—drunk again," he snapped. "Got firearms—I'll teach the black—"

Trelawny checked him as he started on down the path.

"This is not a usual situation, major," he said.

The gravity of the doctor's tone caused Cornsweet to look up in surprise. For the first time he saw the pistol in the doctor's hand and Digby's gun against the porch rail.

"What the devil—" he spluttered.

"I have been in on one native uprising," said Trelawny. "That chanting and those torches are painfully reminiscent. I hadn't thought they would dare start anything with a ship in the harbor, but—"

For just a second the blustering major seemed meek.

"What would you suggest?" he asked.

"The back path will get you to the village before they do. Perhaps you can get some one out to the Corsicana for help. Those natives are in a dangerous mood, and any show of strength that you can muster would be advisable, I should say."

Cornsweet turned back. "Perhaps you're right," he said.

Digby picked up his rifle. "I'm with the major. Can you manage alone here, doctor?"

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The doctor smiled grimly.

"We're as safe here as anywhere," he said. "If they decide upon violence our collective goose is cooked, I'm afraid."

VI.

FROM Converse's bungalow the little footpath led further into the wood to two other houses. One of these was the doctor's, and the other was the governmental house.

This was distinguished in no other way from the others except that in the daytime a British flag flew from a pole projecting from the roof. From this house a path cut diagonally down into the village.

It was much shorter than the main route, but impossible if there was baggage to be carried, or for more than single file progress. Cornsweet explained to Digby that by going this way they would in all probability reach the village before the natives since they were moving slowly, hampered by the frenzied singing and dancing.

But Major Cornsweet had not reckoned upon two things. One was his temper, and the other was his assistant.

As he and Digby, hurrying down the path, approached the government house, Digby saw another man sitting on the porch. First only the red point of his cigarette was visible, but as they stopped in front of the house, the light from within outlined Overton's figure.

He was stretched out in a steamer chair, a highball on the table beside him. He was a slight, almost cadaverous looking fellow, of medium height with a scrubby mustache.

He turned languidly in his chair as they arrived, and Digby noticed the long, slender white hands of which McLeish had spoken.

"I say, major, what's all the shouting?"

"Hell to pay!" snapped Cornsweet. "Looks like an uprising of some sort. This is Smith—Hamilton's new man."

Overton got slowly up from his chair and held out a hand to Digby.

"Charmed, I'm sure, Mr. Smith. Is the celebration in your honor?"

Overton's thin lips were drawn together in a supercilious smile. Digby disliked him at once, although he put this partly to a natural prejudice developed after hearing what every one had had to say about the young assistant.

"It's a warm welcome, at any rate," he replied.

"Get your pistol, Overton, and join us," said the major impatiently. "We're going to the village. Put an end to this damned nonsense!"

"Good Lord, major! Not stepping into a hornets' nest, are you? What? A bit foolhardy to mix with the pesky johnnies when they've been drinking, I should say."

"Can't let 'em ride rough shod," growled the major. "A little show of authority—that's what they need."

Overton sank back in his chair.

"I say, if you don't mind, I think I shall stay here," he said placidly. "I've no taste for this sort of thing." He turned to Digby. "My business is writing letters, and all that sort of rot," he explained. "Never did care about scrapping—especially on a hot night, y' know. So fatiguing!"

Cornsweet took a quick step forward.

"This is serious!" he thundered. "We need every man we can get—no time for tomfoolery."

Overton still reclined in his chair. He picked up his highball glass and sipped at it insolently.

"You'll really have to pardon me, major," he drawled. "I'm not in the mood for this sort of thing."

Cornsweet's throat muscles were bulging with anger. Digby saw him clenching and unclenching his fists spasmodically.

"Had just about enough of your damned impertinence," he said. "This is a matter of life and death to all of us. If for no other reason than to save your own yellow hide you'd better come with us!"

Digby thought he detected a slight narrowing of Overton's eyes, but in no other way did he betray any anger.

"Let's not brawl about it, eh, major? I'm staying here."

There was a note of firmness in his voice that rather surprised Digby. If the man was a coward, he at least was not at all afraid of the blustering major.

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"They shall know about this damned insubordination at home," said the major, turning away. "By God, I shan't stand it any longer."

"Glad to take your dictation any time, major," replied Overton coolly. He addressed Digby. "I think you're something of an ass to mess around with those blacks. It's not what I should prescribe for a health cure, Mr.—ah—Smith."

Before Digby could reply the major had taken him roughly by the arm and started along the path.

"No time to lose," he said gruffly.

As they went down the path Digby heard Overton chuckling softly. What an unutterable cad the man was! And yet Digby was puzzled.

Overton had been described to him as a coward, yet he apparently was unafraid of the major, who could have broken him in half with one hand. Moreover, it occurred to Digby that it took more than a little courage to stay alone in that bungalow, with the natives on the rampage. It would have been more like a coward to stick with the rest of the whites at a time like this.

Then came a suggestion of the possible truth. It was Margo, of course. Overton would probably start for the other bungalow as soon as they were out of sight.

The major was hurrying along the path ahead of Digby, swearing softly under his breath. It was evident that his animosity for Overton had reached a boiling point and this last incident had capped the climax.

In addition to that, this back route to the village was steep and rough. It was little used, and the path was obstructed by low hanging boughs, stones, and fallen trees.

The major plunged along, stumbling and cursing. If the chanting of the natives had not been an unpleaant reminder of the seriousness of the situation, Digby would have been tempted to laugh.

After five minutes of hurrying, the major paused. They were on the edge of the village clearing. Already the procession of natives was in sight on the main path.

The delay at the government bungalow had been fatal to their plan of arriving before the shouting, singing crowd. The natives were now worked up to a hysterical pitch.

Several of them had guns which they persistently fired into the air. The torch bearers cavorting like whirling dervishes, their black, oily bodies gleaming in the flickering light. It was a grotesque sight.

The major wiped the perspiration from his face with a large red silk handkerchief.

"The other whites are probably all at Lebeare's," he said. "The best thing for us to do is to make a break for it."

From the point where they stood, still shielded by the woods, there was a distance of nearly a hundred yards in the open to Lebeare's place. There was no time to be lost if they were to make it before the natives reached the clearing.

The major took a deep breath and bolted, Digby at his heels.

An excited shout went up from the natives. Several shots were fired, and Digby heard the whine of a bullet unpleasantly close to his head.

"The damned beggars shoot pretty straight," he panted.

The major wasted no breath on a reply. A moment later they were pounding on the door of Lebeare's shop. Evidently the inmates had barricaded the entrance, and it seemed an interminable time before they opened it, although it was actually only a matter of seconds.

VII.

THE white, drawn faces of the little group in Lebeare's gave mute evidence of the strain they had been under for the last half hour. Lebeare himself, an unlighted cigarette between chattering lips, bolted the door behind Digby and the major, and pushed the several packing cases against it which he had used as a barricade.

With him was old Tom Healy, complacently smoking his stubby pipe, but with a gleam of excitement in his weather-beaten eyes. Another man, a sailor from the Corsicana who had come ashore for a drink, was peering anxiously out of the window at the throng of natives who were slowly approaching the store.

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Two Chinese coolies, the men who had taken Digby's luggage to the bungalow, were huddled together in one corner, silent.

At first Digby thought this comprised the whole group. There were no lights in the store, only the pale shimmer of the moon through the windows and the ghoulish shadows resulting from the dancing torches in the village clearing.

But now Digby was aware of some one else. A besotted voice came from the corner near the makeshift bar:

"An' when I die,
Don't bury me at all;
Jush pickle my bones
In alcohol—"

Grant. Grant seated in Lebeare's old Morris chair, a glass of gin in one hand, and beating time to his song with the other.

His dirty sun helmet was pushed back on his head at a rakish angle, and he stared dully, uncomprehendingly at Digby and the major.

"'Nuff fer a poker game now," he muttered.

Lebeare was excited.

"*Mon Dieu,* major! What is this? Have these blacks lose their mind?"

The major's pale blue eyes bored into Lebeare.

"No time for play-acting," he snapped. "Those blacks are armed, Lebeare! Where the hell did they get guns, eh? If I thought you were responsible for this—"

He took a threatening step toward the little Frenchman. It was Healy who diverted the quarrel.

"A man would be a damn fool, major, to give guns to the natives so they could turn 'em on him. That mob out there are looking for more liquor, you can bet that. Somehow I don't figure Lebeare here would give 'em guns so's they could shoot him fer a drink. No, sir. It's deeper than that. This is a sure enough uprising, sir. Those babies out there'll stop at nothin' to-night. I know 'em."

As he spoke there was a tearing sound and a bullet ripped through the door and buried itself in the opposite wall.

"Where's Trelawny?" Healy asked the major.

"Stayed with Converse," explained the major. "Couldn't move him, and Margo stuck too. That yellow swine, Overton, refused point-blank to help. He's hiding in the wood now, no doubt."

"No doubt!" This comment came from Grant, a silly smile on his face. The major turned away from him disgustedly.

"What's our next move, Healy?" he asked.

The old timer shifted his pipe from one side of his mouth to the other before he replied. There was a faint note of amusement in his tone.

"It's up to them devils out there," he said. "But mark my words, sir, unless you find the cause for all this trouble, we're done for. It's like poor old John up there. The doctor don't know what poisoned him, so he can't treat him proper. Unless we find out who's stirred up these blacks and who's givin' 'em guns—"

Healy completed his idea with a suggestive shrug.

"But, good God, man, we've been trying to do that very thing for months!" fretted the major. "Everything that's landed at the island passes through your hands, and you've been able to detect nothing. Lebeare—well, we've searched this place, you know that."

Digby had no further illusions about Lebeare. He was watching the Frenchman throughout this conversation and the terrified expression on his face was not assumed. He was in a blue funk, his teeth chattering so loudly that Digby could hear them.

"Before God, major, I know nothing of thees gun business," he cried. "Look, monsieur, we all face death here. Let us be honest. If I had guns for the natives I would give them to you now so that we might defend ourselves. I do not want to die, monsieur!" And he crossed himself fervently.

"The fellow's telling the truth, sir," Digby cut in. "I'm sure of it."

The major looked helplessly about. Healy seemed his only refuge.

"You know more about this sort of thing than any of us, Healy," he said. "Would you advise opening fire on them? Could we frighten them away?"

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The din outside was becoming terrific. The drums were pounding in unison again and the noise of the chanting was redoubled. The sailor at the window turned to the others.

"They're surrounding the place," he said. "Dancing and singing to beat hell. More than half of them are armed, I should say. Looks bad."

He came across and joined the others.

"The captain's got a machine gun aboard ship," he said. "If we could get word to him."

"If he doesn't hear this noise," said the major, "there's something wrong."

"He'd be a fool to come ashore without knowing the lay of the land," Healy opined. "He's only got a handful of men and they'd be helpless out there in the dark."

The old man shook his head.

"Find the cause for this and we can stop it," he persisted. "Find the man that's caused the trouble."

Digby had been thinking. The number of whites on the island was so small that to spot the man Healy was talking of should be comparatively easy.

Of the group here in the store, Grant was the only one he really suspected. Lebeare's fright was too natual. He couldn't suspect the blustering major. Healy was an old-timer. He knew better than to fool with the natives.

That left only Grant as a possibility. Grant and the Chinese coolies.

He turned to the major.

"Don't you think, sir, it's time we found out the truth about this fellow Grant?" he asked. "He spends most of his time in the woods, I'm told. He helps unload the ships that come in. Couldn't he have smuggled firearms to the natives? Couldn't he have fermented all this trouble? For God's sake, sir, isn't it time to make him talk?"

"We've no time to hold a court," cut in Healy. "Hear that noise out there? It's getting louder. Unless I'm mistaken, the best thing for us to do is to take our posts near the windows and prepare to fight. We've each got a gun of some sort. We can hold 'em off for a bit and trust that McLeish will come ashore in the morning."

"We haven't five rounds of ammunition between us unless Lebeare has some hidden away," said the major. As he spoke a broadside of shots ripped through the door. The glass in the rear windows was broken by another volley. "They mean business all right."

Suddenly Grant, who had been singing in his maudlin fashion, got to his feet.

"Have a novel idea," he said. "I'll stop the blighters. Music 'll do it. Give 'em a barrage of music."

In the corner stood the case which contained Overton's new piano. It has been unloaded from the ship that afternoon, and still in its wooden crate, it stood in the far corner of the store.

"Get out the piano and play music," muttered Grant.

Before any of them could stop him he had picked up an ax which lay on the floor and approached the crate. With three solid blows he demolished one side of it, disclosing within the solid mahogany top of a small grand piano.

"Stop the damn fool before he kills himself with that ax," snapped the major. "He's drunk."

Grant laughed.

"Music 'll do it," he assured them.

Once more the ax rose, but instead of further demolishing the crate he smashed the top of the piano. Again and again he brought the ax down on the piano. Then he laughed again.

"See, what did I say? Music is man's best friend."

He backed away and staggered over to his chair. With a sudden ejaculation the major stepped over to the smashed piano.

Inside the splintered case were no strings, no little padded hammers. Instead, neatly packed, were a dozen army rifles of the newest design.

"Overton!" thundered the major.

Back in his chair, Grant was singing once more.

". . . Jush pickle my bones
In alcohol."

VIII.

WHEN men stand shoulder to shoulder in defense of their lives one has a pretty good

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opportunity to determine their mettle. So it was that Digby, during a lull in the native attack, took stock of the men who were huddled together in Lebeare's store.

The heat was unbelievable. There was scarcely any movement in the air and the store itself was heavy with the pungent odor of gunpowder.

Digby wiped the perspiration from his face with the sleeve of his shirt and leaned against the wall.

There had been no time for questions after Grant had unearthed the contents of the piano crate. Along with the rifles the major found several hundred rounds of ammunition packed carefully in the box.

How Grant had known that the guns were there was something of a stickler. At first Digby had been almost convinced that it was a pure, drunken chance.

But later he altered this opinion and began to have serious doubts as to whether Grant were drunk at all.

The natives, having surrounded the store, started a steady firing. Meanwhile the torch bearers began to creep as close as possible.

Old Tom Healy pointed out at once that their objective was to get close enough so that they might throw their burning brands on to the thatched roof of the store. If they succeeded in this the fate of the men inside would be very definitely sealed.

Healy seemed automatically to take charge of the situation. The major, blustering and cursing and swearing that "if he ever got his hands on that swine, Overton," was of little value. Healy ordered each man to a point of vantage with instructions to concentrate entirely on the torch bearers.

The natives twice tried a very simple ruse. A large body of them would pretend to rush the front of the store with the purpose of attracting all the attention. Meanwhile several of the torch bearers attempted to sneak up on the rear of the building.

Healy fully understood this maneuver and was prepared for it. He had posted Digby and Grant at the two rear windows and he kept them there while he, the major, Lebeare, and the sailor repulsed the front attack.

It was during one of these moments that Digby got his first suspicion of Grant. The Englishman had taken a gun and staggered to his post, the picture of drunken helplessness.

Healy had gravely told Digby that Grant would be of little use.

"Everything will depend on you, lad," he said. "That fool won't be able to hit the side of a house."

But old Tom was wrong.

Grant had fumbled awkwardly with the magazine of his rifle to make certain it was loaded. But presently, when an overenthusiastic native rushed into the open waving a flaming torch, Grant's gun went to his shoulder so rapidly that Digby was dumfounded.

One shot from that gun and the careless native crumpled in a heap. Then Grant swayed on his feet, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and smiled in a maudlin fashion at Digby.

But Digby was not fooled. That one moment when all the uncertainty, all the unsteadiness had left Grant, and that rifle had come to his shoulder with a precision that was perfection, had convinced Digby that for some reason the man was shamming.

His whole pose of the drunken derelict was broken down in that one fleeting moment.

Digby smiled back at him.

"Nice work, old man."

"Used to shoot pheasant on the wing," explained Grant thickly.

There was no time for further prying into Grant's game, for at that moment another attack was launched on the front of the store and again a torch bearer crept out into the open at the rear.

This time it was Digby who nicked him. He had to fire twice, however, for his first shot went wide.

"Dreadful waste," muttered Grant.

It was during a lull which followed that Digby had an opportunity to talk with Tom Healy.

"What do you make of this gun-running by Overton?" he asked.

The old Irishman took his pipe out of his mouth and expectorated.

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"There's a reason for everything in this world," he said. "Overton isn't any one's fool, Mr. Smith. You can take my word for that. He's a smart man. For some reason he wants to get rid of the whites on this island. In particular he wants to get rid of Mr. Hamilton's interest. The poisoning of John Converse is tied up with this, I'll bet."

"But for what reason?" Digby persisted.

Tom shook his grizzled head.

"It beats me," he said. "There's more in it than Overton, of course. Some one's been shipping him this stuff from America and maybe other places."

"What do you make of him?" Digby nodded toward Grant.

"I've never been able to dope him out," admitted Healy. "Between you and me I don't think he's half as drunk as he pretends. For a long time I've thought he might be at the bottom of the trouble here. I'm not such I still don't think so. He may be in with Overton."

"But why would he give away the gun-running business?"

"I dunno, Mr. Smith. Except that he'd risk a lot if his life was at stake as it is here. Then again it might have been just a lucky chance."

"That's out," said Digby. "Watch him handle a rifle and you'll soon see that he's as sober right now as you and I. I'd like to know just how much he understands the situation; just how much he knows about Overton; in fact, just who the devil he is."

"It 'll all come out in the wash," replied Healy. And he went back to his post. Another attack was being organized by the natives.

All through the night these spasmodic sorties by the blacks were continued without success. The incessant beating of the drums and the chanting continued, even during the fighting.

It was evident that the blacks had given up the idea that they could take the store by force, and the torch bearers had lost any relish for stepping out into the open.

The men inside began to feel that the danger was past. Healy assured them that with the first morning light his old friend, McLeish, would come ashore with his sailors and that then the natives would retreat into the hills.

Digby began to wonder about Margo and the doctor back there in the bungalow. There was no way for him to tell whether any of the natives had gone back to bother them or not.

It occurred to him that if they were under Overton's protection they would be all right. It was inconceivable that Overton, however much of a villain he might be, would permit Margo to fall into the hands of the blacks.

Still, it seemed probable that he was back of the poisoning of her father. Digby remembered the man's cool insolence to the major.

The steely look in his blue eyes when the major had called him yellow suggested that Overton, if aroused, might prove even more ruthless, more dangerous than the natives. If he had organized this uprising of the blacks the time was evidently ripe for whatever plans he had in mind.

What could the fellow's object be in this business? What was there to gain?

If he was trying to frighten John Hamilton into giving up his property at Manuia he was working at a futile task. Hamilton was not the type to be frightened. If Overton had in mind a little high-handed piracy he would find himself bucking an overwhelming opponent in the Hamilton interests.

It must have been about half past three in the morning that the first faint light of the coming day began to appear. Almost at once there seemed to be a renewed excitement among the natives.

The men in the store who had relaxed their guard a trifle went once more to their posts. But no new attack was contemplated. Instead, the natives were drawing back into the woods along the main path.

"It's the skipper and the crew!" cried the sailor.

Hurriedly Lebeare and the others pulled the barricade away from the door. Up from the beach came McLeish and his men.

The captain strode along in front, a rifle in his hand. The crew followed, two of the men carrying a small brass cannon.

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Lebeare was in a fever of excitement. The strain had been great on the little Frenchman, and now he was dancing about like a lunatic.

It was he who told McLeish of the events of the night, dramatizing them to their fullest extent. The captain explained that he had not dared come ashore in the dark.

"We might all have been wiped out," he said. "Then there'd have been no hope for any of you. Another ship may not be along for weeks."

Old Tom Healy then told the captain of the discovery of firearms in the piano crate. The captain's profanity was eloquent. He had always known that Overton was a so-and-so of the vilest sort.

"And this Grant," he demanded. "Is he mixed up in it too?"

Healy turned to speak to the derelict Englishman, who had come out of the store with the rest of them. He was not there.

"In the store drinking," McLeish suggested.

Lebeare went after him, and came running out.

"*Sacre bleu!*" he cried. "He has gone! And with two bottles of my best whisky."

X.

A COUNCIL of war was held on the spot. Digby's deep concern for Margo, her father, and the doctor caused him to urge an immediate trip to the bungalow. The major was with him, but his motives were a trifle less philanthropic.

"Want to get my hands on that chap Overton," he fumed."

But Healy and McLeish were opposed to any offensive move.

"I have only fifteen men," explained the captain. "We're well armed, and we could hold off any sort of an attack here at the store. But the minute we move into the woods we have hundreds of those black devils shooting at us from behind trees, or lurking in the bushes waiting to stab us when our backs are turned.

"No, sir, Mr. Smith, I won't order my men forward. My suggestion is that I send a man back to the ship to wireless the nearest British gunboat. If we had a body of trained fighting men it would be a different matter."

"But, good Heaven, captain, you can't leave Margo and Dr. Trelawny at the mercy of those blacks," protested Digby. "It's unthinkable."

"The way I figure it," said Healy sagely, "is that if anything's going to happen to them, it's already happened. Overton's back of all this, and if he chooses to save them, they're probably all right. Anything we do would simply endanger all our lives and do Margo no good. I'm no fellow to sit back and twiddle my thumbs when a woman's in danger, but we can't do any good. If we move up into the woods, it 'll be just as the captain says. 'Like lambs to the slaughter.' We'll have to wait for help."

Digby's lips set in a firm line.

"Then I'm going up alone," he announced.

"Don't be a damned fool," observed Healy dryly.

Digby shook his head doggedly.

"Converse has been working for Mr. Hamilton for years," he said. "Hamilton wouldn't consider sitting back and waiting. He'd go to his assistance regardless of the danger. I must do the same thing. It's my job."

"Monsieur is a brave man, but an idiot," remarked Lebeare.

Healy was sucking on his pipe thoughtfully.

"One man would stand a better chance than all of us," he said finally. "He could move quietly. At least he might be able to scout out the situation."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and spat decisively. "I tell you what, Smith. I'll draw lots with you to see which one of us goes."

Digby laughed, and put his hand on the old Irishman's shoulder.

"You're a great guy, Tom," he said, "but this is going to be my party. You're needed here."

"Damn me, there's no reason why I shouldn't go, is there?" the major queried.

"Major," said Digby, smiling, "you're too much like a bull in a china shop. They would hear you coming through the woods

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miles away. Not only that, sir, but it's your duty as commandant here to stay with the main body of men."

The major grunted. "All I want is to get my chance at Overton!"

Lebeare made no offer of any sort. He could not leave his post. The men must eat and drink. Alas, it was his duty, he feared, to stay here.

However, he did go into his shop to make a snack of breakfast for Digby before he set out. Monsieur would be even braver on a full stomach.

Lebeare's breakfast consisted of boiled rice, a tin of salmon, and steaming hot coffee. It does not sound like an appetizing meal, but Digby was ravenously hungry.

While he ate, old Tom Healy explained the lay of the land to him. Beyond the bungalows was the coconut grove which Hamilton leased. Beyond that was a native village. Only a few of the blacks lived in the clearing near the beach, and they had all deserted with the coming of McLeish and his men.

If the natives had taken Margo and the doctor prisoner, they would undoubtedly be at the inland village. If Digby could find out the exact situation it would simplify the matter of a rescue when reënforcements arrived.

"But you're going at your own risk," Healy concluded. "Your chance of coming back alive is—well, it's small, Mr. Smith. When those black devils are in the mood for fighting it's not healthy for a white man. Once they were all head hunters, and it's in the blood."

Digby forced a laugh.

"I've no ambition to have my head decorating a pole, Tom," he said. "I'll have a rifle and a revolver—and I'll save one cartridge."

"A good idea," said Healy grimly.

Fifteen minutes later Digby was ready to start. The little group of white men gathered around him with solemn faces, and Digby shook hands with each of them in turn.

McLeish, the man who detested greenhorns, was the last to approach him. He nearly crushed Digby's hand in his iron grip.

"Good luck, lad," he said gruffly. "And if you have to fight, give 'em hell!"

"Right-o, captain. And if I don't come back," added Digby, "tell Hamilton that this is better than the best game of poker he ever played."

Digby slipped away to the back path down which he and the major had come a few hours before.

He did not look back at the silent gathering of men who stood in front of Lebeare's store watching him. There was something a little too doleful about their expressions to make him feel comfortable.

Digby was fully aware of the danger he faced in going back into the woods alone, where hostile natives might ambush him at any turn, but as in the case of most young men, death seemed to him to be a remote possibility. He had a belief that some Providence watches especially over drunkards and fools, and he was inclined to put himself unreservedly in the latter class.

Yet he could not help the something in his make-up which impelled him to go to the assistance of the doctor and Margo. Call it old-fashioned chivalry if you will; waiting for help to arrive was not one of the things Digby could do with a comfortable conscience. He had come here to help Converse, perhaps dead by now, and help him he would.

Quickly, silently, and keeping a sharp lookout on both sides of the rough trail which led to the government bungalow, Digby made his way through the woods.

Perhaps the most uncanny thing about it was the profound silence of the shadowy depths of jungle growth. It was so still that it seemed almost to shout a warning.

Digby felt that he was being watched on all sides, and yet he could detect no one, and put it down to an imaginative temperament.

As he approached the government bungalow he loosened his revolver in its holster and then gripped the rifle he was carrying tightly in his hands. Here he might encounter Overton, the man who for some mysterious reason was back of the uprising.

He might or might not know that he had been discovered, and Digby, remem-

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bering his cold blue eyes, decided that the man who was quickest on the trigger would be more apt to live to a respected old age.

But there was no sign of life as he reached the government house. There was a stillness about the place that Digby did not like.

After a moment's hesitation he walked boldly into the house. Everything seemed orderly and untouched.

The highball glass from which Overton had been drinking the night before stood on a small table just inside the door. Digby called Overton's name, but the echo of his own voice was the only reply he received. Nothing doing here.

He hurried along the path to the doctor's place. This, too, was entirely deserted, with no sign of any commotion. The natives had not been interested by the possibilities of loot, that was apparent.

With a sensation almost akin to dread, Digby left the doctor's cottage and continued along the path. As he passed a turn and the thatched roof of Converse's place came into sight, his apprehension increased.

The utter quiet was appalling. Digby quickened his pace and rounded the house to the porch, where he had chatted with Margo the night before under that gorgeous tropic moon.

What he saw made him recoil with a sharp exclamation.

Lying head downward on the little flight of three steps that led up to the porch was Dr. Trelawny. One arm was bent under him in a grotesque, unnatural fashion.

"Doctor! Dr. Trelawny!"

Digby knelt beside him and gently turned his face, which had been buried in the grass. Between the doctor's staring eyes was a small, round hole, clotted with blood.

A bullet hole. He was dead.

X.

Digby stood beside the doctor's body for a full minute before he finally stooped and lifted it to a more dignified position. He remembered the doctor's words as they had come ashore the day before: "I would not leave this island if I could."

Well, he never would now. Until now Digby had not quite felt the grim horror of the situation.

A bitter hatred for Overton, the man at the root of it all, welled up in him, and he swore softly under his breath.

Digby was preparing to carry the body into the bungalow, when he heard a sound which startled him. It was a man's voice in a low, agonized moan. It came from within the cottage.

Digby had forgotten Converse. He hurried into the house and to the back room, where Converse lay on his little, low cot.

Digby had not seen him before, for the old man had been so ill when the Corsicana arrived that the meeting had been postponed at Trelawny's order.

Converse lay on his back, his eyes wide. His lips were swollen and half open, and his hands gripped the coverlet as if he were in terrific pain. At sight of Digby a look of hope came into his bloodshot eyes.

"Water!" he said thickly.

Beside the bed on a chair was a pail, half full, with a tin dipper beside it. It was close enough for Converse to reach it, but evidently he was too weak. Digby stepped forward and filled the dipper. Converse writhed to a half sitting posture. His eyes were wild again.

"No—no—no!" he protested. "Poison!" And he fell back on the cot, breathing heavily.

Digby decided that this was a fevered hallucination, but he knew where he could get fresh water. He had gone to the spring back of the cottage for Margo the night before. There was another pail in the kitchen, and Digby got it and hurried out to the spring.

Converse drank eagerly from the china cup which Digby brought with the fresh water. He had evidently been suffering acutely from thirst.

Even before he had strength enough to explain, Digby had guessed the truth about the pail on the chair.

Converse spoke with an effort. "Overton left that water there to torture me," he said. Then he looked quickly at Digby. "Who are you?"

"Smith is my name, sir. I am your re-

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lief, Mr. Converse," Digby told him. "I arrived on the Corsicana yesterday, but you were too ill to see me. Since then a great deal has happened. Can you tell me what took place here, sir?"

Converse passed a hand over his eyes as if he were trying to wipe away a vision which pained him.

"I heard the natives last night," he said finally. "I knew what was happening. Then Overton, the major's assistant, came. I've never liked him, but I never guessed—Look here, Smith, he's back of all this trouble here. He—he killed Trelawny, and left me with that pail of poisoned water to die like a rat. God!"

Digby hated to ask the next question.

"And your daughter, sir?"

Converse writhed on his bed.

"He took her, God knows where. The man's a maniac, Smith, or else the most ruthless, cold-blooded scoundrel I've ever known."

Suddenly tears came to the old man's eyes, tears of helpless rage. His body shook with a convulsive sob.

"Margo—Margo!" he cried. "Oh, God, that I should fail her now when she needs me most."

Digby reached out and took the old man's hand in his.

"Don't worry, sir," he said. "We'll get Margo back. And we'll get Overton. Already we have sufficient evidence to hang him."

Converse was pathetically eager.

"You don't think it may be too late? If he harmed Margo—"

To Digby the answer was obvious. Overton had intended that Trelawny and Converse should be found dead. Margo he wanted for himself, and it was safe to assume that things had been happening too quickly for any harm to come to her as yet.

But there was no time to lose. If only McLeish had seen fit to attack!

He explained the plan to Converse. Nothing could be done until help arrived in the shape of a British gunboat.

"But that may be days!" Converse groaned.

"But I'm going ahead alone, sir," Digby assured him. "Personally I can't stand inaction. I've got to know what's happened to Margo, and I'm going to get a crack at that guy, Overton, if it's the last thing I do on earth."

For the first time Converse seemed to gain control of his emotions.

"Look here, Smith, you're a game kid, but you can't whip a whole village of natives. McLeish and Healy are right. It would be walking into certain death if they attacked with an inferior force."

Digby smiled. "Where is the village, sir?" he asked.

Converse's tired eyes met Digby's bright blue ones. A faint suggestion of an answering smile flitted over his dry lips. He gripped Digby's hand tightly.

"Keep along the main path until you reach the grove," he said. "It's not more than a half mile. Then keep to the north for another mile. But remember one thing, boy. These blacks aren't like white men to fight. You can't stop to palaver. If you're attacked, you've got to fight to kill. They won't ask questions or answer any."

Digby nodded. "First I must get you down to the post. I can't leave you here alone."

"The hell you will!" Converse said with some spirit. "Leave me food and water where I can reach it. You can't waste time. Margo—"

Converse would not listen to an argument on this point, and Digby finally agreed. He had no wish, personally, to delay.

In the kitchen he found food, which he put on the chair beside Converse's bed. In ten minutes he was ready to leave, having first brought Trelawny's body into the front of the house and covered it with a sheet.

He had no further conversation with Converse, except to say good-by. The older man was so eager for help to reach his daughter that he had no thought for anything but to get Digby started.

Out on the trail once more, Digby moved forward as rapidly as he could, sometimes almost at a run. The more he thought about the situation he had discovered at the bungalow, the more anxious

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he was for a meeting with Overton, whom he believed to be thoroughly depraved.

He had poisoned Converse, deliberately murdered Dr. Trelawny, and abducted Margo—a night's work which it would be impossible properly to avenge.

His chief concern now was for the girl. Yet as he hurried along the path for the grove he realized that he had little if any chance of bringing her relief of any sort.

He was alone against a whole village of blacks and Overton. Overton would stop at nothing, that was evident, and if he discovered Digby attempting to rescue Margo, Digby's life would not be worth the proverbial plugged nickel.

The best Digby could hope for was to get a thorough idea of the lay of the land so that he could direct a successful attack when reënforcements arrived.

Suddenly Digby stopped. Ahead of him on the path he saw a native—a tall, oily-skinned black. He had been coming down the path, and at sight of Digby had stopped too.

Now he turned and began to run back the way he had come. Digby thought quickly. If this fellow got back to his village and warned the others that a white man was lurking about in the woods, the success of his venture would be impossible. He raised his rifle and took aim.

As he did so, there was a crashing in the bushes behind him and a voice, a white man's voice, spoke sharply:

"Drop that gun—quickly!"

Digby spun around. It was Overton, and he was covering Digby with a rifle.

XI.

DIGBY'S first impulse was to shoot it out with the major's assistant. But he realized that if he moved he was done for.

Overton, his gun to his shoulder, his thin white forefinger trembling on the trigger, had a decided advantage. Digby dropped his rifle and slowly raised his hands above his head.

To accept defeat before he had been able to do a thing for Margo was a bitter pill for Digby to swallow.

"Now, unbuckle that revolver holster and let it fall," Overton ordered. "And don't let your fingers stray, Mr. Smith, or I shall be forced to bore a neat little hole between those lovely blue eyes of yours."

Digby could do nothing but obey. Completely disarmed, he waited for Overton's next move.

The Englishman lowered his rifle and came forward a step. His lips were twisted in that cynical smile that Digby had seen on their first meeting.

"Really, old fellow," drawled Overton, "I couldn't have you shooting that native. The chap's a friend of mine."

"No doubt," said Digby shortly.

"Oh, come, Mr. Smith!" Overton laughed softly. "A fellow must be a good sport, even when he's beaten, eh? Won't do you a bit of good to pull a long face, y' know. Fortunes of war, and all that sort of thing. You shouldn't wander about in the woods alone if you don't want to get into trouble. It's not safe, I assure you."

"I've seen enough of your work, Overton, to be quite certain of that."

Overton laughed again.

"Then you really can't complain, can you?"

He came forward now and picked up Digby's discarded weapons.

"I'm very much afraid," he said, "that you'll have to accept my hospitality for a bit, Mr. Smith. I'm spending my time in a lovely little native village at the present. Very quaint place, especially if you're at all interested in primitive civilization. You'll find it a veritable treasure house of quaint objects and customs."

Digby bowed in mock courtesy.

"Charmed," he said dryly. "I suspect the place is overrun with vermin, though."

Overton's pale eyes flashed.

"Your repartee is a trifle edgy," he said. "I advise against it. And now if you'll about-face and start along the path we'll reach my domain in a jiffy. It's really just a pleasant little walk."

Without a word, Digby turned and continued along the way he had been headed. He was angry and bitterly disappointed. Somehow he had felt that he would be able to outwit Overton, and to be caught like a child was unbearable.

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Moreover, he realized that his position was an extremely dangerous one. He couldn't understand why Overton was taking him prisoner, instead of handing him the same treatment that he had given the doctor and Converse. It was obvious that the man had absolutely no scruples about committing murder or any other crime.

Then the old question repeated itself to Digby: What was back of it all? Why had Overton organized a revolt? To what end all this bloodshed and murder?

Surely not just for the purpose of securing Margo for himself. That was unbelievable. Behind it all there was some obscure reason which must explain it all.

Presently the path ahead of Digby opened out into an enormous grove of cocoanut palms, obviously cultivated.

"This is the grove you came here to manage," said Overton. "Do you know, old chap, I'm awfully afraid you'll never get around to that little chore."

There was an ominous note in his cold voice.

On through the grove they proceeded in silence until they reached another path, along which Overton directed them. A few hundred yards beyond they came into view of the village. A mass of thatched huts surrounded by a low, mud wall.

Several blacks came running out to meet them. Evidently news of their coming had preceded them.

Overton handed Digby's rifle and revolver to one of the blacks and spoke to him in a tongue which was quite beyond Digby's comprehension. The blacks formed a sort of prisoner's guard about Digby, and Overton, his gun tucked under his arm now, drew alongside.

"These fellows speak Javanese," he explained. "A really beautiful language when you get to know it. The people themselves are delightful. So trusting. Just like children!"

They entered the gate of the village and made their way between rows of huts. A crowd of blacks gathered about them as they moved on.

They were all armed, most of them with crude lances or swords, but many of the younger men had guns, Digby noticed. They all stared at the prisoner, and there was a good deal of ill-tempered muttering.

Once a black tried to break through the little guard to strike Digby. Overton spoke sharply and he slung away, murmuring to himself. Evidently there was considerable bitterness toward the whites who had protected the store.

Suddenly as they rounded a corner Digby saw Margo. She was standing in front of one of the huts, guarded by two huge natives.

At sight of Digby she gave a little cry and started toward him, but her guards pulled her back. As they drew alongside, Overton halted the procession.

"Of course you know my *fiancée*, Miss Converse," he said.

Digby saw Margo's eyes flash, but she ignored Overton.

"I'm sorry they've got you," she said. "Desperately sorry. You can expect nothing but the foulest sort of treatment from this murderer!"

"Oh, come, my dear," Overton expostulated. "Haven't you been treated with the utmost courtesy. Really, I think you're a bit unfair."

Then Digby's anger boiled over and he turned on his captor with burning eyes.

"You damned cad!" he exploded. "I had just left the bungalow when I encountered you. Mr. Converse told me the whole story. Moreover, the men at the store know the truth, too. Your piano, Overton!"

Margo, at the mention of her father, stepped forward eagerly.

"Dad is—is alive?" she asked.

Digby nodded. He was watching Overton, who had turned a shade whiter and was breathing heavily.

The Englishman, for just a moment, showed that this news was unwelcome. Then he turned to the natives and gave an angry order. Digby was taken roughly by the arms and pulled along the row of huts to a large one at the end. He caught one last glimpse of Margo, who was watching him dejectedly.

Digby was pushed into the hut, followed by Overton and the natives. The hut was barely furnished. A rough hewn table and

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chair and a straw sleeping mat in the corner was all it contained.

Once inside, Overton's insolent manner left him and he faced Digby, snarling.

"Now, young man, you'll tell me just what in hell is going on down at the store. What are their plans? Will they attack us here, or are they waiting for us to move?"

For the first time Digby felt that he held the upper hand. Overton had shown his first sign of uncertainty.

"Don't be an idiot, Overton," said Digby. "You can't really expect me to give you any information of that sort."

"I not only expect it," said Overton grimly, "but I'm going to get it from you."

He turned and gave an order to one of the natives who stepped out of the hut.

"Make up your mind to one thing, Smith," Overton continued. "This is not a matter of child's play. Your life isn't worth a penny unless you come across with what I want to know."

"Not all of us are traitors and murderers," said Digby. "You can't get one iota of information from me, Overton. You're wasting time."

The native who had gone out of the hut at Overton's order now returned. In his hand was a long, ugly-looking, rawhide whip. He was smiling hopefully.

"One chance to change your mind," said Overton. "Just one chance, Smith. I'm not going to argue with you. Haven't the time, y'know."

"You'd better proceed," answered Digby. "I've taken beatings before this."

"But none quite like the one you're about to get," said Overton. He spoke sharply to the natives.

Before Digby could move two of them had ripped off his shirt, and he writhed under a vicious blow from the lash which whipped and cut around his body. Then he set his teeth and braced himself.

Again and again the snakelike thong bit into his flesh. Perspiration stood out on his forehead, but he didn't flinch. Just once Overton held up his hand to the whip handler.

"How about it, Smith? Change your mind, eh?"

Digby shook his head. Overton smiled his cruel smile.

Again the lash descended. Digby's strength was waning, and now he crumpled down on one knee and covered his eyes with his arm.

The pain was almost unbearable, but Digby was silent. Finally he collapsed, in a semiconscious state onto the floor. The lashing stopped.

"I'll give you a few hours to think this over," he heard Overton say. "Then we'll repeat this little performance if you keep so damned stubborn."

Some one turned him roughly over and tied his hands behind his torn and bleeding back. Some one else secured his feet. Then he was left there alone, on the floor of the hut.

XII.

It seemed like a lifetime to Digby that he lay on the damp floor of the hut. In point of fact it was several hours.

At first he had been too weak to move at all. Later he had tried to work his way into a more comfortable position. But his hands and feet had been bound cruelly tight and his back and shoulders were so badly lacerated from the beating he had received that any position at all was agony.

As he lay there he had an opportunity to contemplate just what had happened and what was likely to happen.

It was a sure thing that Overton would never release him, even if he were to give the information desired. It would be suicide for the Englishman to have any one go free who had as much incriminating evidence as Digby possessed.

That his career, such as it was, had come to an end, Digby was certain. If he could only do something to help the girl before he was put out of the way.

But it was hopeless even to think of such a thing. Overton held all the aces, and Digby was helpless.

He was terribly thirsty. He had had nothing to drink since leaving Converse hours before, and the experience he had been through had left him dry and parched.

But Overton evidently had no intention of being at all human in the treatment of

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his prisoner. Digby knew this from having witnessed his diabolical treatment of Converse.

Once or twice Digby struggled hopelessly to loosen the bonds, which cut into his wrists. Finally he lay back on the damp floor, unresisting. There was nothing he could do to help himself or any one else.

When the shadows of night fell over the village Digby had still been unvisited. He had reached a point of such acute suffering from thirst that he felt, when suddenly the door of the hut was darkened by the figure of a huge native, that he would give almost anything for a drink of water.

The native seemed to be looking up and down outside to see if he was observed, and then came quickly into the hut. In his right hand Digby saw the gleam of a steel knife blade.

So he was to be slaughtered in cold blood! Well, anything was better than this agony of thirst.

The native knelt beside him, and Digby saw the flash of his white teeth bared in a smile. To his intense surprise, the native slit the bonds that had held his feet and hands. Then, from a gourd which he carried over his shoulder, he offered Digby a drink.

Relief! It was with something very like a sob that Digby lifted the gourd to his lips.

While he drank, the native took two objects from the folds of his loin cloth. One was an automatic pistol. The other was a folded piece of paper. He handed them to Digby.

Digby unfolded the paper and read:

> You can trust Lutu. Don't fight if you can help it. It's best to cut and run. This is all I can do for you, old fellow.
>
> GRANT.

Digby stared at the note. Grant! Grant, who seemed to always do the unexpected and helpful thing at the right moment.

Lutu was tugging at Digby's wrist.

"Must hurry!" he said in a low, guttural voice.

Digby got laboredly to his feet. Every movement was an agony of pain. But he was armed once more, and there was hope in his heart. Still he hesitated.

"Lutu, we must help Miss Converse," he said.

The native shrugged as if to say that it was a task doubtful of success.

"Must hurry!" he repeated.

Digby always contended afterward that it was a kindly Providence that hid the bright moon behind heavy, threatening clouds that night. As he and Lutu emerged from the hut the village was in inky darkness, except for the faint glow of fires here and there.

As cautiously as hunters stalking game, they crept along the row of huts until they approached the one in which Margo was held. In front of it stood the two guards, as they had earlier in the day. Digby whispered to Lutu:

"Creep around behind the hut. You take one and I'll take the other."

The big native nodded understanding and slipped away into the darkness. Quietly Digby crawled to the side of the hut and then slowly around until he was almost directly behind one of the guards.

Using the revolver Lutu had given him as a club, Digby suddenly rose to his feet and hit the guard in front of him a terrific blow on the back of the head. Without a sound, the man sank to the ground.

His partner, astonished, started forward, but with equal suddenness a huge black hand was clasped over his mouth and the fingers of another sank viciously into his windpipe. Presently he lay beside his companion.

Digby heard a low chuckle from Lutu as he stepped into the hut.

Margo was lying on a straw mat in the corner as he entered, but she was not asleep. At sight of him she sprang up with a glad little cry.

"Oh, my dear," she said softly, "I thought they had killed you."

And before Digby knew quite how it happened she was clinging to him, sobbing like a child. But it was no time for comforting or explanations.

"We've got a chance to make a break for it," Digby said. "There isn't a moment to lose. And, listen! If anything happens to me you're to keep going. Do you understand that?"

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She nodded, not trusting her voice to reply.

"We've got to try to get clear of the village without attracting attention. One of the natives is helping us. But if we have to fight, I don't want to feel that you're in danger. You must promise me that at all costs you'll head for the store."

"I promise," she said. "But it's so unfair that you should risk your own chances on my account."

"Perhaps," he said, a faint twinkle of amusement in his eyes, "I am strengthening my chances—for you."

Then he took her hand in his and led her out of the hut. Lutu was waiting.

"Must hurry!" he said once more, and slipped away so quickly that Digby and Margo had difficulty in keeping up with him.

Twice natives came wandering along the open row between the huts, and the fugitives ducked into the shadows, Digby gripping the revolver tightly. But they were unnoticed.

They had almost reached the village gate when a great shout went up behind them. One of the fallen guards must have recovered or else a passing native had seen their flight.

Lutu, who had been moving along in a half crouch, stood upright with a grunt.

"Run!" he said sharply.

The big native was fast as an antelope, and Digby and Margo struggled after him, panting. At the gate were two natives, evidently guards.

As they caught sight of the flying trio, one of them who had a gun raised it hurriedly to his shoulder. Digby stopped and dropped on one knee.

There were two sharp reports from his revolver and the native with the gun crumpled into the dirt. The other, with a cry of surprise, ran. Lutu now took Margo by the hand and pulled her along.

He moved so quickly that her feet scarcely touched the ground. Digby looked back over his shoulder. A dozen natives, headed by Overton himself, were tearing after them.

Digby lowered his head and ran as he had never run in his life before. Several shots were fired after him, and once he heard the whistle of a bullet perilously close to his head, but he didn't stop. This was no time for a fight.

Lutu raced down the trail toward the coconut grove with Margo in tow. Digby, gasping for breath, stumbling in the dark, followed as best he could.

He was still stiff and sore from the hours he had been tied on the floor of the hut. His muscles ached painfully. But he kept on.

The pursuers were gaining on him, but it was almost joy that he felt when he saw that Lutu and Margo were also pulling away. They at least would be safe.

Suddenly Digby's foot caught in an outgrowing root of a tree. It was all so quick that he scarcely knew what happened.

He plunged headlong off the path into brush at the side, and rolled down an embankment into a thickly grown gully. He lay still, hurt and exhausted.

A moment later he heard the pursuing party rush past on the path above. For the moment he was safe.

For a long time Digby crouched in the gully. As he lay there the clouds which had enveloped the moon dissipated and once again, as on his first night at Manuia, the forest was bathed in a glorious silvery light.

But to-night it was a menace to Digby. He dared not move out into the open until a long time later he heard what he presumed was the pursuing party returning He could only guess that they had been unsuccessful in overtaking Lutu and Margo.

When they had passed out of earshot, Digby slowly pulled himself up the embankment to the edge of the path. He parted the bushes in front of him and peered up and down the path.

The natives were out of sight, but coming slowly after them, Digby saw something that made his heart leap.

Overton, a gun tucked under his arm, the picture of weariness, was returning to the native village. Overton—alone.

With every muscle tense Digby waited for Overton to draw abreast. Then he sprang out at him.

His first objective was the gun which

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he wrenched out of the Englishman's hands and threw aside.

"Now, damn you, I'll do a little beating of my own!"

For just a moment Overton fell back, a look of fear in his eyes, and then as Digby smashed at him with a wicked right-handed blow, he sprang forward, fighting desperately as a man fights for his life.

Whatever advantage Digby had in physical size was lost in the weakening experience he had undergone in the last hours, but his bitter hatred for the man who had murdered Dr. Trelawny, who had poisoned Converse, and who had directed the laying on of that frightful lash, made a demon of him. He brought Overton to his knees with a fierce blow to the point of the chin.

Overton was quick to see that he could not match blows with Digby and as he staggered to his feet he hurled himself forward and closed his long, white fingers on Digby's throat.

For one horrible moment Digby thought he was beaten. McLeish had laughed at those slender, feminine hands, but now they were like steel hooks, biting into the flesh, cutting off Digby's breath.

Digby shook his man as a dog shakes a rat, but Overton clung to him. It was his only chance. Then with one despairing effort Digby connected once more with the Englishman's jaw.

A smothered sob, and Overton dropped to the ground.

Digby leaned against a tree, struggling for breath, and wiping the blood and sweat from his face. Finally he kneeled beside Overton.

The man had been unarmed except for the rifle. Digby lifted him across his shoulder and staggered down the path toward Lebeare's store. The victory was his.

XIII.

It was an excited and happy group of men who ran out of Lebeare's to relieve Digby of his burden when he appeared, staggering under the weight of Overton's still unconscious form. Margo had arrived an hour or two before with the account of their escape, but there had been tremendous anxiety for Digby and they had almost concluded that he had been recaptured when he appeared.

Digby was so exhausted that he could not tell his own story at the time, and Lutu, after getting Margo safely to the store had disappeared again with no explanation. Margo dressed Digby's injured back and he rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep.

Restoratives were administered to Overton, and he eventually regained his senses. Major Cornsweet and Healy questioned him as to the motive back of his crimes, but Overton only smiled faintly.

"You chaps are such silly asses," he muttered. "You don't really think I'll talk, do you?"

And so the night passed away and in the morning, Digby awoke, smelling the delightful odor of Lebeare's steaming coffee-pot.

Over his breakfast he told his version of the escape. Old Tom Healy sat by, rubbing the stubby growth of beard on the end of his chin.

"This fellow Grant," he said finally. "There's something about him I don't understand. How does it happen that he's in with Lutu, the native? How did he know about the contents of the piano box?"

"He's a thief!" pronounced Lebeare as he poured another cup of coffee for Digby. "He stole two bottles of my best whisky."

Digby grinned. "I tell you what, Lebeare. I'll pay for those myself. After all, I owe the fellow my life, I expect."

Margo, who had finished her breakfast and was listening to the talk in silence, spoke up.

"Two or three times I caught him sneaking around the bungalow," she said. "He was always drunk, and I could never get any explanation from him."

The major confirmed this story. He had caught Grant near the government house one night, and, in spite of all sorts of threats, the derelict Britisher had refused to talk.

"His drunkenness was something of a hoax," said Digby, pushing his chair back from the table and lighting a cigarette. "He was apparently on the verge of

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passing out here the night of the fight, but when the time came for action he was as steady as a rock. Never saw a better shot with a rifle in my life."

But the real explanation of Grant came from the man himself.

Just as breakfast was completed he appeared, walking briskly across the clearing to the store, followed by Lutu, who was weighed down under a mass of bundles. Grant's first words were to Digby.

"Glad to see you're all right," he said. "Sorry I couldn't do more for you last night."

Digby shook hands with him. "You probably saved my life," he said.

"All in the day's work," rejoined Grant. He turned to the major, and his heels clicked together as he gave a brisk, military salute.

"I've been perpetrating something of a fake here, major," he said. "I'm Captain Grant of the Intelligence Department, sent here by the government to find out just what the trouble was on the island."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the major.

"I always knew that monsieur was a man of importance," remarked Lebeare with a sage nod.

Grant laughed.

"The government owes you a little bill for liquor," he said. "I had to have it to keep Lutu on my side. The man's capacity is enormous, believe me."

Once more he addressed the major, "Sir, I want you to arrest this man, Overton, on my charges. Murder and treason are sufficient grounds, I suspect. My one regret is that I was not able to get the necessary information soon enough to prevent the death of the good doctor and the discomfort and danger to Miss Converse, not to mention Smith here, who proved himself something of a brick. I think you will find that the natives, deprived of their leader, will be easy to manage."

"Then you think it is safe for us to go to my father's assistance?" Margo asked eagerly.

"Your father, Miss Converse, is all right. I stopped at the bungalow on the way here. He had gained enough strength to get out of bed and make himself an appetizing breakfast which I shared with him."

"But tell me, captain," said Digby, "what in God's name is back of this business?"

Grant looked at Overton, who was standing sullenly by one of the windows, his hands tied behind him.

"Will you tell them, or shall I?"

"Really, you're a much better narrator than I," said Overton, with his twisted smile. "Pray tell the story yourself, captain."

"It's the old, old story of greed," began Grant, lighting a cigarette. "Our friend here discovered a secret which was unknown to the government or any one else, for that matter. There is a rich deposit of gold in the stream which runs through Hamilton's grove. You must admit that that was a great temptation. Overton communicated with friends at home who helped him with his scheme.

"They sent him guns and all manner of trinkets with which to bribe the natives, whom he quickly won to his side. His next move was to make things so difficult and dangerous here that Mr. Hamilton would be willing to give up his lease when Overton's friends approached him.

"I think he might have succeeded in this effort if suspicion hadn't been aroused at home by the falling off in the export of copra. I was sent here, and unfortunately dared not confide in any one, for the only person I really trusted was myself. It was not until I saw Overton panning samples of the gold one night that I learned the truth.

"Still I had no evidence against him and it was a long time before I had enough to convict him. In fact, it was not until I surprised you gentlemen by breaking open that piano crate the other night, that I had a complete case. That was guesswork on my part, but it proved a correct one."

Lebeare threw up his hands in a despairing gesture.

"*Mon Dieu*, all the time there is wealth at my back door and I do not know it! This is terrible, monsieur."

The major explained that Captain McLeish, who had gone out to the Corsicana

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that morning for supplies, had wirelessed for a gunboat, which should arrive at any time.

"Then with your permission, sir, I shall take the prisoner aboard myself," said Grant. He turned to Digby. "I couldn't help you personally last night," he explained, "because I dared not endanger my own life until I had given this information to the authorities."

Digby accompanied Margo to the bungalow where they found her father, still very weak, propped up in a chair. He had already got the whole story from Grant, but his joy at seeing Margo was almost pathetic.

All day Margo busied herself in straightening up the bungalow, and Digby had the doctor's body removed to the post where arrangements for its burial were made.

It was not until after supper that Digby had a chance to talk with Margo. It was just such a night as his first one on Manuia when he had chatted with her on the porch of the bungalow. The strenuous activity of the last few days seemed almost like a dream.

"I suppose you and your father will be going back on the Corsicana," Digby said.

"Dad is still very weak," Margo replied.

"But he could make the trip," said Digby.

"Yes, he *could*. But you've had very little time to learn the ins and outs of the management here—Digby."

Digby turned eagerly toward her.

"You mean you think he might stay on a bit to help?"

"Now that the mystery here has been solved and there's no more danger, I think he might," said Margo.

"And will you mind putting off your trip to the States?"

"I shall like staying," said Margo. But she looked away quickly.

For a moment they were silent, then Digby reached out and took her hand in his.

"This country certainly does *get* you," he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

THE END

BY THE FIRE

WHEN the shadows blur the sunset is the time I love the best,
By the crackle of a fire where a thousand fancies nest.
In its flames I see proud seigneurs tramp the galleons of Spain,
And I watch Drake send an Armada below the restless main.

I can see the hardy pilgrims landing on a coast line bleak,
And their taming of the savage after turning him each cheek.
In the crackle of the fire I can hear the song of guns,
Like the dim-remembered lullaby that stilled the warring Huns.

There are sweeter visions also in the embers in the grate,
Of an understanding mother and a dad who was her mate.
And a girl who brought me romance when the lilacs were in bloom,
Just her mem'ry warms the flickers that enhance the friendly gloom.

There are faces of old buddies long forgotten in life's rush,
They smile at me from the firelight in the long day's closing hush.
Yes, there's pleasure in the fire when the stars are hanging low—
It is then that mem'ry's treasure chest lies mirrored in its glow.

Pat Costello.

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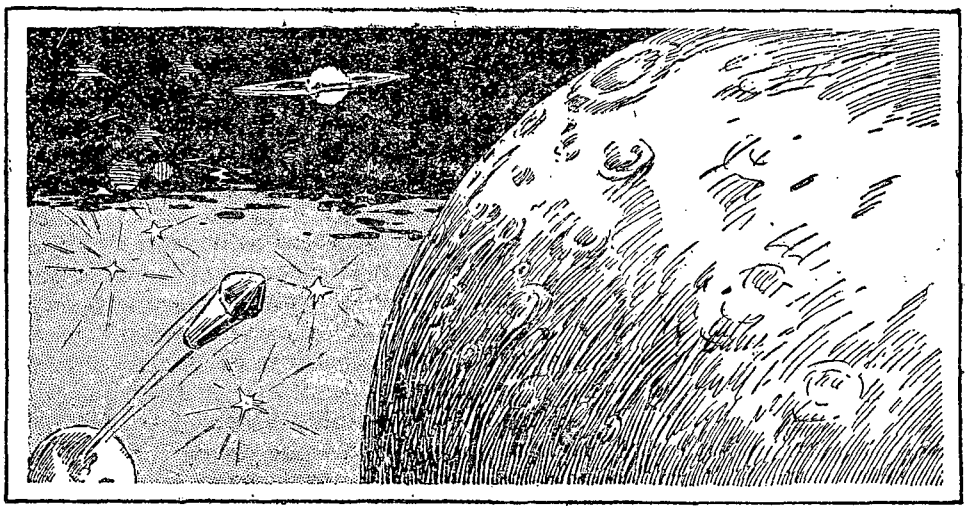

Luckett of the Moon

By SLATER LAMASTER

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

THROUGH his propensity for allowing other people to get him into trouble, N. B. Luckett found himself soaring at a mad pace above the Mineola air field. It was his first trip in a plane; in fact, the first time he had seen one closely; and for many minutes he sat too dazed to move, trying to puzzle out the various contraptions. What N. B. was not aware of was that he was attracting the attention of the entire country below him, for the simple reason that he was in an experimental plane of the inventor, Le Faire, purported to travel at five hundred miles an hour, and which no pilot had ever offered to test. To buffet the wind, which was causing the plane to careen wildly, Luckett put on full speed. When the cockpit became insufferably hot and sparks appeared from the front of the plane, N. B. leaped overboard in a parachute, just as the airplane burst into flames. The next morning he awakened in the de luxe stateroom of the liner John Adams, in New York Harbor, where he read the news of what was termed his daring exploit. He realized the truth of his unwilling accomplishment, that he was the nation's hero, and that his speed of four hundred and fifty-nine miles an hour was nearly twice the world's record. His unfortunate name, Napoleon Bonaparte, which he had kept carefully concealed, was revealed; and his taciturnity because of embarrassment was attributed to a Napoleonic complex. Among the crowd waiting to enter was Lieutenant Ronalds, who had pulled the hoax on Luckett.

CHAPTER IV *(Continued).*

DARK BREAD RETURNS FROM THE WATERS.

OUTSIDE the stateroom the distinguished delegation had experienced quite a wait, and this had given Lieutenant Ronalds a much greater opportunity to bask in the limelight than he had anticipated. It was he who—all unwittingly—started the hero on his phenomenal flight, and since that moment, one might say, the lieutenant had stood, as it were, in the enviable position of being the one man on earth who knew more than anybody else the flying particulars about this very startling young fellow, and he did not know much. He hated to think of it, and did not mention the fact either, that he had, just previous to the great exploit, met Napoleon on a train.

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for January 7

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Lieutenant Ronalds had arrived at the steamship John Adams early this morning, and General Tompklinson, his highest superior in the aviation division of the army, soon followed. Here now waiting with the lieutenant was the general himself.

It was a matter of no little importance that there should be present General Tompklinson, that blustering dignitary in the army who was ever so adamant for discipline in the ranks. It was a byword in the whole division about what would happen to you if you passed him, this high officer, and neglected to salute. He, it seemed, and another gentleman had made a quick trip from Washington overnight.

Then came in Mr. Boylan, mayor of New York. The pleasant duty fell to Lieutenant Ronalds of introducing these two great gentlemen, he having met his honor the mayor at a street parade and having by necessity and otherwise met the general all too frequently.

It was quite an impressive introduction, the way Ronalds handled the affair, with due regard to the importance of each—not forgetting for a moment that any puffing statements which he might deliver would reflect favorably to the advantage of Lieutenant Ronalds, since one man was his military superior and the other a great politician with Presidential possibilities cropping out from his way of handling the multitude.

Inside, N. B. had managed to get himself propped up in his bandages to a sitting position among pillows. He curiously watched them come in, and Ronalds ranged them ceremoniously around the room. N. B.'s heart beat a little easier after he had reviewed the crowd, and he saw that the general and Le Faire, both of whom he had seen many pictures, were not present.

"Mr. Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett," Ronalds began, "allow me to present His Honor the Mayor of New York."

N. B. paid small attention to this introduction, for he saw at the moment a mechanic setting up a radio microphone to catch the whole affair. He did not recognize the mayor, but he recognized the microphone. He would have to be careful in his remarks, he surmised—he might even get arrested, and he did not care to have everything happen so publicly.

"Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett," his honor opened up, pretending not to have noticed the lack of recognition on the young gentleman's part, "all America welcomes you to-day as one of her greatest sons. The most daring men of this country have now added to their number another courageous native son, even it might be said her most courageous son."

But about here N. B. was getting impatient.

"Yes! Yes!" broke in N. B. disinterestedly on the badly startled mayor. "Thank you very much—now let's give the rest of the boys a chance!"

The gentlemen of the press smiled covertly. Already they had decided that they were going to like this surprising young man. In fact, they had not had anything half so good in years; he was playing up to his rôle too magnificently for words.

Napoleon Bonaparte now turned a vague questioning expression to Ronalds and Anita, the persons of all others who should help him face any trouble which might arise, because they had got him into all this.

Ronalds now rushed up and grasped N. B.'s hand impulsively, but if Ronalds rushed, Señorita Anita Gomez sped forward. Before N. B. could open his lips to utter a carefully framed question about the humor of the two disquieting ones outside, Anita was upon him, both arms tenderly drawing him to her bosom and heaping kisses upon his cheeks.

"*Mio carissimo! Mio* hero!" she cried, and there was an outburst of soft Spanish which charged the air with romance.

Flushing even through his burns, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett resolutely freed himself and looked inquiringly at Ronalds, now red to the ears and trembling, but still a game sport.

"Anita has read the papers," he translated haltingly. "She says she knows all, and that she thinks more of you than ever. She says she understands that you did all this for her, and that you are her hero."

The news scribes were taking notes gleefully.

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"How did you do it?" asked Ronalds.

Now that was the question N. B. feared. The press crowded around, the mayor edged up curiously, and the darned radio fellow in charge set the microphone a little closer into the spotlight.

It was a tense second for N. B., in which he had to push his wits to their limit. If he only knew positively the attitude of those two men outside, he could have answered the question readily, but as it was, and inasmuch as he had no counsel, legal or otherwise, he felt that one of those crises had arisen in which every man has to be his own lawyer.

What was it that he had read in newspapers that a crook could do when he wanted to refuse to convict himself by telling the truth? Oh, yes—he could say that he refused to answer lest his answer tend to incriminate him. But that sounded too crude—he would have to trim the phrase up into less suggestive words!

"How did you do it?" insisted Ronalds.

"Please excuse me," answered Napoleon lightly, "from relating the details of the incident. Such commonplace description would tend to degrade me!"

A ripple of astonishment ran over the reporters. Without a word of the facts from the hero, they were getting a whale of a story—much better than technical stuff about the flight which meant nothing to the public. "Such commonplace description would tend to degrade him"—what did he mean by that?

There was mystery behind this man—that was the stuff the public ate up! Mystery and miraculous accomplishment, superman stuff, with the shade of Napoleon hanging over his birth as actually proved by the dispatches from his home town. That was big sure-fire stuff!

All of the reporters naturally fell back politely; and N. B., not to lose this opportunity, abruptly pulled the lieutenant's head over for a private conversation.

"Is this fellow Le Faire sore?" he whispered. "And how does the old drill master feel?"

Ronalds thought he understood instantly what the trouble was, and why the two men outside weren't welcomed. Had he himself not been arrested for starting this flight!

"Mr. Le Faire," declared the lieutenant openly, "states that Mr. Luckett is one of the greatest of patriots for testing his machine, and is deeply indebted to him. General Tompklinson, for the army, agrees in this heartily."

"Have General Tompklinson and Mr. Airplane Le Faire come in," said N. B.

Two men about the same age, one the embodiment of health, but bristling with indignation under a burning curiosity, the other a cripple with wasted legs shambling along between crutches, advanced to the bed.

"Luckett," said the disabled one feelingly, "you have the real stuff in you which conquers new worlds, and I am prouder of you than the whole damn army and anybody else or anything in America! I'll always wait as long as you wish for such a one as yourself, and I can easily do it, for I don't have to wait often."

"I am sorry," replied N. B. meekly, genuinely moved. "I didn't understand—I didn't understand that you were so much bigger than the average—even as big as—as—your engine."

The general now edged over to the bed, and with one eye on the press representatives—for he was slightly uncomfortable at the lack of attention he was getting here—he dropped a little remark calculated to bring things back to normalcy.

"Luckett!" he demanded, with a malicious twinkle in his eye, "what is your company?"

N. B. glanced up at the towering general quickly. He could scarcely believe that the man had been guilty of such an unwarranted presumption.

"Look it up in the telephone book," he shot back at him sharply.

The gentlemen of the press grinned widely. Such lese majesty was exactly what was to be expected from the sort of person N. B. had shown himself to be.

But the general could not let even a hero get away with a quip like that.

"Young man," he retorted, "no one more than myself appreciates what you have done for our country, but I am telling

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you that no matter what you may do for it, discipline is going to be maintained in my department, and any flippancy from you or any one else will not be tolerated."

"General," N. B. grimaced in a plainly boresome attempt to be conciliatory, "thank you very much for calling, but I don't wish any argument to-day."

N. B.'s arm twitched with pain from resting so long in one position, and very stiffly he brought it suddenly from under cover. As he did so the general anticipated a salute, and with a set face he returned it. But N. B. had not thought of any such thing as a salute. He was merely trying to get his arm in a more comfortable position, and he succeeded very nicely.

Also just as the general started to salute, Airplane Le Faire had begun to say something and N. B. had given his full attention to him, for he liked this cripple instinctively—indeed he liked him more than any one else in the room. The fact is N. B., having already turned his head, did not see the general's hand go up at all, but the reporters got the full flavor of the whole thing.

"Wow!" they chuckled to themselves. "The man is very, very like the great Corsican—absolutely contemptuous of all authority!"

Le Faire, quick as a flash, caught the full effect of the byplay, and the opportunity of adding an additional harpoon was too inviting for the old cynic to resist.

"Napoleon," he shouted, "dismisses you from his presence, general! He promoted himself somewhere above you yesterday! I don't think he is in the regular army anyhow! He flew out of it last night and he's just a volunteer for America now!"

"Hell," breathed the general in disgust under his breath and stalked out.

The steward had asked him several times if there was any service he could render. Finally N. B. asked for the captain and that gentleman stepped forward from among those in the room.

"Captain," he requested, "I presume this boat will be in port a few days, and if I don't inconvenience you, I shall just remain here and sleep. To put it mildly I am a bit fatigued!"

"Certainly! Certainly!" joyously responded the captain.

The excitement of the period since N. B. had awakened had somewhat allayed the pain from his multitudinous injuries and burns. In his peculiar attachment of mind, moving rapidly from one thing to another, his worries were abated. The whole thing was settled for the immediate present and his physical self again claimed his attention. Now the pain began to well up again, in torrents of suffering.

N. B.'s head dropped; his chin touched his breast; a set look, lost and vague, came into his eyes but his face was calm and impassive. The arm which he had taken from under the covers lay across his breast, and now he instinctively thrust his fingers inside his pyjama jacket to touch a wound which was aching horribly. His hair had fallen lightly over his forehead. Those in the room saw before them the living reincarnation of the "Man of Destiny."

Suddenly he spoke:

"Gentlemen, please go; except Mr. Le Faire."

The crowd filed out, all anxious to tell the world about what they had seen.

The moment they were alone, Le Faire fearfully pulled back the covers and examined N. B.'s legs.

"Why! They are sound!" he exclaimed happily as his eyes became moist. "I saw your arms were movable and I thought it must be your legs! Twenty years ago I rode the granddad of the machine you piloted yesterday, and though then I only accomplished a little bit of what you did last night, I had to come off of her, too, just as you did and it didn't fare so good with me."

He looked down at his own withered limbs.

"I am awfully glad you saved your legs, boy!" he added. "The loss of mine has made me a mighty cantankerous old grouch!"

N. B. felt strangely attracted to this eccentric old inventor. Here was a good fellow with whom to start telling the truth. He grasped the old chap's hand and some of his pain subsided.

"Mr. Le Faire," he pleaded, "all the honor and credit in this flight are due you.

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I know so little about aviation that I thought I had done something I shouldn't. I was afraid to let you and the general into this room because I believed you had come to arrest me for destroying your wonderful plane!"

"My Lord!" cried Le Faire. "We couldn't find a man brave enough to let that thing out full speed! The government would throw away any number of them for testing purposes to get the data you gave us! You are a genius! You actually mean to tell me that you had never been up before?"

"Never," declared N. B. "I got all my training right on that ride."

"You are the most remarkable fellow who ever lived. Say! I am beginning to believe there is something in all this Napoleon stuff about you!"

"It's nothing," replied N. B. "The whole thing was a fluke as far as I am concerned—you simply had a marvelous car and I let her out accidentally."

"Fluke be damned!" yelled Le Faire. "Accident be damned! You are a great hero! Do you think I am a fluke? Do you think your Napoleon Bonaparte was a fluke?"

"No, but great men are quite different from me!"

"Don't be too sure about that! Let me tell you something! The truth can only be discussed by the very few who are intelligent and that's not many, but I am going to take a chance on you and discuss it. I didn't intend to invent that airplane to go so fast, either! I was trying to construct the lightest engine on earth and in putting her parts together I stumbled upon the fact that I had the fastest thing in creation by touching her up a little! What do you think of that?

"I will say I did a good job as soon as I accidentally found out how to do it. That's all there is to my genius in the matter!"

"You don't mean it?" N. B. voiced his genuine wonder. "What is life anyway—merely a hit-and-miss affair?"

"Son, I don't know and I can't tell you where to get any more authentic information, but right at this critical spot in your career let me give you a few pointers on the man you are named after.

"France was torn internally by a revolution when Napoleon, a good average strong man, came upon the scene. He happened to fall in love with a Josephine who got him a generalship in the armies through another sweetheart. You may not know it but at the time of Napoleon's great early victories, four ruling houses of Europe were all crazy and the rest of them were made up of incompetent weaklings. But for these things to begin with, he would never have been heard of! By sheer accident he, an exceptionaly able man, found only the weakest and rottenest sort of opposition. No military tyrant ever had such a glorious opportunity before and he made the most of it.

"Ability and circumstance make us all. It's what you do when you get your opportunity that counts and you rode your opportunity to a mighty glorious finish last night!

"No, boy! If you don't take opportunities into consideration we are nothing! We are all flukes except for getting our chances or accidents or whatever you want to call them in our favor and what we are is what we do in these circumstances when they come. Results count and you have delivered the goods, under most astounding circumstances.

"Now here's a little advice to you. We have been discussing the truth and little men never understand that. The fact is if you told people your story, they might actually be so impudent as to criticize you, provided you could ever get them to believe it. You are a great hero because regardless of how you did it, you rose fully to the occasion and copped all the grapes in and beyond sight!

"'Now don't spoil it by a lot of silly mouthing which is sure to be misunderstood!

"You must keep quiet for another reason and I ask this of you personally. Your great speed record stands as an incentive to accomplishment in aviation and puts our country far ahead of every other nation.

"I have the whole blooming army standing right on its ear, and Washington will

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turn out these airplanes until they will protect this country like a blanket of hornets. Tell the people the truth and they will just laugh at you and neglect to provide this defense. You don't want the army to laugh at us, do you?"

"Scarcely," said N. B. with an involuntary shudder.

"If the truth were known I could not get trial practice with my planes and look at what would be lost! You must promise not to humiliate me?"

"All right," agreed N. B. "Come to think of it, I am not very anxious to talk about this anyhow."

"Boy! There's a lot depends on your keeping still. I have worked my head off trying to get this country to prepare a real air defense, for all victories will come from above in the future, but the most obvious things mean nothing to ordinary men. You have got to fire their imagination by building the glamour of romance around what you are trying to put over.

"Facts and figures—the truth itself alone, no matter how it is proved—mean nothing at all to people at large. They must have things visualized for them dramatically, just as you have shown them glorious accomplishment in my airplane. Then they will do homage to the idea and tumble over themselves to furnish means of repeating the miracle.

"You are a hero! Do your duty to humanity by remaining one! Tell them nothing! Stand on your record! It is something to be damn proud of! I'll do any little explaining that may be needed. You have done for me an enormous favor, and I'll return it any time and often—when, as, and if necessary!"

N. B. grasped his hand feelingly without another word more being spoken.

Alvius Le Faire left and with head ringing and his body paining him all over again, N. B. writhed about trying to go to sleep in that downy bed. Anyhow, on any conditions, and in any way whatsoever things weren't so bad for him! It was very good to be alive!

For two days the conquering hero, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett, slept and rested in the palatial suite aboard the steamship John Adams. If people had known the truth they would have said that for one who had been so rash, he certainly displayed remarkable canniness.

He refused to see any one but his physicians, nurses, and steward—all the outside public were excluded, with one notable exception—Alvius Le Faire.

The seclusion afforded him a much needed opportunity to think and get his one-track mind properly focused on the new situation which confronted him.

N. B. read all the newspapers avidly. They should give him his cue on how to act if he were to save Mr. Le Faire's air program and himself.

The news developments were surprising and set his rôle for him in a sensational manner. The first newspaper he received the same day of his reception was captioned in large type:

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE LUCKETT GRANTS AN AUDIENCE NOTHING LESS

The World's latest wonder, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett, who it is now generally believed is the result of the continuous prenatal suggestion of his illustrious namesake, besides startling the world by traveling at the rate of four hundred and fifty-nine miles an hour in a Le Faire airplane, to-day gave further evidence of his right to bear his illustrious name.

He is a baffling combination of haughtiness and geniality, absolutely contemptuous of authority, proud as Lucifer, and he vindicates that pride at the slightest encroachment upon it, yet he modestly neglects to relate the particulars of his flight for which every paper in America is clamoring.

Another paper oversang his glory and incidentally cast a disturbing factor into his system.

"What Will He Do Next?" it shrieked in big type—then followed:

What will he do next? This young Napoleon, so dramatically powerful and real, who dreams absent-mindedly of other bigger things all the time, even when he is being congratulated upon a seemingly impossible feat! We believe this is but the beginning of the wonders which he will perform and that we shall hear much more from him! It is not in our province to say, but we should think with his star just risen that he is far

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from Elba and Waterloo! While this tremendous spirit is on the ascendant, one may expect almost anything from him. What will he do next?

N. B. was not pleased with this kind of publicity in the least. It made him secretly nervous. It would even suggest there possibly might be something expected of him bigger than that airplane ride.

CHAPTER V.

"THE CONQUERING HERO COMES."

THE next morning N. B. made known his intention of leaving the vessel that day at noon. He called in the captain, and thanked him for his hospitality, as afforded by the steamship company. During the next half hour the captain was very busy obeying instructions that he had minutely received in advance for the event of the hero's landing.

When Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett, accompanied by Mr. Le Faire, feebly ascended the gangway to the wharf, they found a considerable retinue awaiting them. They were conducted to a limousine, and Lieutenant Ronalds stepped in with them.

N. B.'s car swung swiftly through the traffic, and he quickly noticed the reason for this unusual speed. Two motor cycle cops, making the devil of a racket, preceded him and two followed. Behind them rushed some other cars with the rest of his official receiving party.

This touch of splendor rather stunned N. B. He was not yet quite sure but that a jail might loom up somewhere ahead.

"We are going to lunch," announced Lieutenant Ronalds, as ever the master of ceremonies, "at the Novocia Hotel with the Scientific Academy of America."

This did not appeal favorably to N. B. Also he suspected that Anita Gomez might lurk somewhere around the end of the journey.

"No! No, lieutenant!" he remonstrated. "Just take me home, 56 Northop Street, if you please," and when Mr. Le Faire turned his shining eyes questioningly upon him, N. B. added, under his breath: "I don't think my rent is paid!"

"You are a caution," piped up Le Faire. "I'll look after the little matter of state you mention!"

The cavalcade, with its motor cycle sirens blazing the road, turned across town and ran into a little side street before a modest old-fashioned apartment house.

"Tell them good-by. Thank them for me," was all N. B. said to Ronalds. "And then come up to join Mr. Le Faire and myself, but please don't bring any of your companions. They sound to me like a bunch of firemen who love their work."

"Very well, sir," replied Ronalds formally. "Thank you, sir."

"Good Lord," declared N. B. as he helped pilot the happy old grouch, Le Faire, up the two flights of stairs to his rooms, "I was afraid the lieutenant was going to salute me!"

"If he does," puffed Le Faire, "let him do it! That's the way you get things done!"

After this first day he found it necessary to appear in public, and the following days of N. B.'s fame were replete with jagged incidents—some humorous, some pathetic, but all important while the plastic material in N. B. poured itself readily into the mold of public opinion. A new existence was framing itself up for N. B.

Life became at once as grand as it had been previously monotonous and, not so far back in the past, actually miserable. Yet as much as N. B. was satisfied with this life as a hero, it was no grander at certain times than it proved tedious at others.

He quickly discovered that there is very little free merchandise in this world, no matter how generously it seems to be heaped upon one. He found out that a person has to pay continually for the gifts that the gods bestow if in nothing farther than serious efforts to retain them.

In his own case, it was apparent to N. B. that to be great one must really be great or in some manner supply the illusions of greatness.

He was confronted with the duty now of keeping up his new identity at all costs for the sake of Le Faire and the avoidance of the personal ridicule which would surely follow a revelation of the real facts.

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The value of Le Faire to N. B. was inestimable. He had achieved substantial success. He was already American's foremost inventor, and this argued well for anything he undertook. The man, himself, was no mean sponsor for his prodigy—if there was any one alive competent to vouch for the ability of Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett it was Alvius Le Faire, the very one who had furnished the wings for the young eagle and now his inseparable companion.

A little time, along with so many other things, brought some marvelous changes in N. B.'s quarters. N. B. would not give up his humble apartment for more palatial quarters even at Le Faire's urgent invitation, and on second thought the shrewd inventor agreed with him, for he saw in some of the young man's natural plebeian tastes and scruples, good stuff to popularize him with the multitude.

Therefore, since N. B. let Le Faire do most anything he cared to because he had assured the young man that he was going to make a lot of money on the publicity for his airplane—although N. B. didn't exactly understand how he was going to do it—Le Faire went ahead and transformed the interior of N. B.'s home at 56 Northop Street about as he pleased.

By devious means Le Faire secured the two adjoining apartments, one of which was conveniently vacant, and he had walls knocked out and doors cut between all three apartments with his characteristic energy at once creating sizable quarters. It all happened so quickly that N. B. felt as though his expanding ego had knocked these walls out.

Prints, pictures and tapestries which the great Napoleon had actually owned or which were near him began to show up on the wall space in appropriate taste. The floors took on a polish of glass and soon from the Directorate furniture a visitor got the disquieting impression of having dropped into the Tuilleries or possibly Malmaison.

Strange it was how these manifestations of destiny affected N. B. If he had provided these furnishings himself their influence would only have stilted him. As it was, this insidious home atmosphere and his peculiar rearing combined, tended to make him fall naturally into his grand rôle.

His high chamberlain, Eggelbert, secretary of deportment, showed in a huge negro one morning. He was remarkably ugly and had a wicked glance until his mouth spread open and he smiled genially.

"My name is Zanzebar," he said, "and I is to be de Duke of Marmalade, de personal man to Napoleon. I sho never did meet a grander man than you to salaam!" With that he folded his arms and swept himself down to the floor.

"The Duke of Marmalade?" repeated N. B. in amazement.

"Dat's what de gentleman, Mr. Le Faire," explained Zanzebar, "says I is to be and dis heah sho is one sweet job for me!"

A few minutes later Zanzebar appeared in a rich Oriental costume.

"Lordy! I feels like I was de high cockalorom of some lodge, but Mr. Le Faire, he says I is only to keep my Alabama mouth shut and your snuff box filled at all times!"

Later in the day Le Faire entered.

"Have you seen Zanzebar, your Mameluke?" he asked. "You know really we must have a Mameluke by all means. The emperor scarcely ever appeared publicly without his great black slave, the Mameluke. Anyhow, it is well to bolster up our ferocity to some extent."

"I should say I have seen Zanzebar," answered N. B. "But he thinks he is the Duke of Marmalade."

Lucket really liked all this, and enjoyed each manifestation of his popularity.

Within the first week Napoleon's mail had become voluminous. Now he began to understand what Le Faire meant about his making money. He began to get all kinds of business propositions.

All sorts of companies would pay him handsomely merely to put his name on their directorate. It seemed they were unanimously of one opinion. Each one believed that his stupendous brain would be of some little help no matter what the industry happened to be, and incidentally thought his name might assist them in

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selling a little stock as well. These invitations N. B. did not deign to answer, except where Le Faire suggested a polite refusal as a matter of courtesy.

Some of the communications, though, were more suitable and thus more aggravating to N. B. Some were preposterous in their requests—especially so were those which seriously touched upon his ability.

In view of the fact that the shade of Napoleon had actually driven through the air at four hundred and fifty-nine miles an hour and dived from a fiery furnace in the clouds, some people begged him to dive to famous wrecks a mile under the sea and remove treasure. They would pay any amount of money he asked for these services.

Others wanted him to exterminate the boll-weevil in the South, and to explore bottomless pits in various parts of the country. He heard of old abandoned mines so deep and poisonous that the bats had died in them, but they wanted him to try.

About this time N. B. was awarded a membership in the Scientific Academy of America for his great patriotic services to the nation. He esteemed his election to the scientific society a very high honor and he wrote a letter seriously thanking them.

Since he knew this letter would be made public, N. B. took occasion to state positively some things on which he wanted all doubts settled. He stated emphatically that he was not a soldier, that he was only a plain civilian, humbly interested in the welfare of his country, that he was more deeply interested in scientific progress for our advancement than anything else, and that, therefore, he appreciated the honor of his recognition by these learned gentlemen more than anything else which could have come to him.

A certain Professor Bridport was a member of this learned society, and when N. B. accepted the membership in it he had never heard of him. If he had he surely would have written more discreetly.

By this time offers on which N. B. could make money—lots of money—were coming in wholesale, but they were of such a nature that he could not accept them. He received a flattering request to go in vaudeville for a few minutes' talk. Newspapers and magazines would pay any price for his story, and inasmuch as it was summertime Chautauqua calls abounded.

But the last thing on earth N. B. intended to do was to talk publicly about his aërial exploit—the key to his and Le Faire's ruination.

In the meanwhile expenses were piling up. N. B. had only a vague idea of how much he already owed Le Faire, and his sense of decency actuated him to make a mighty effort to correct this balance in some honorable manner.

Le Faire had been noticing N. B. eating a little saucer of bran each morning at breakfast. This grew to be so much of a habit with N. B. that finally Le Faire questioned him on the matter.

"Do you enjoy that stuff?"

"No," answered Napoleon honestly.

"Well, why in thunder," he asked, "do you eat it?"

"The Strong Man Mashed Oats Company," said N. B., "pays me one hundred dollars a month to say I eat it, and that's no lie!"

The press was now about lashed to a frenzy. They were as reluctant to drop the best news story of the century as were N. B. and Le Faire to have them do so, but after all Napoleon would contribute no statement to their columns and the details of the mystery with which he surrounded himself were painfully meager.

"What will he do next? What will he do next?" was about all the press could cry, and this they did with one accord.

N. B. understood that this static situation could not last much longer and the cry of the press was just the point which was worrying Napoleon, too. What would he do next? He didn't know! He knew that one reputation quickly followed on another in a great city and to hold himself at the present high water mark of his fame he would have to give the public one sensation after another.

About this time the great rocket which Professor Bridport was building up in Connecticut to shoot to the moon began to claim public attention, and the newspapers were filled with it.

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This Professor Enoch Bridport was reported to be one of the world's greatest astronomers. He had discovered whole universes bigger than our planetary system in the ends of the Milky Way.

To him was accredited that famous distant star Bullthumtum, with its cold light coming from so far away, according to the professor, that it proved our earth to be two million years old, for it took its light that long to get here. With all his ability Professor Bridport was near-sighted.

N. B. was at first glad to see the old fossil's scheme usurp much of the space which had been previously devoted to asking him "what would he do next."

N. B. had a better appetite at breakfast with that question off the front page of his morning newspaper. Then he got a further shock.

It appeared that Professor Bridport was seeking a suitable man to go inside of the rocket and be shot to the moon. Napoleon did not like that quest on the professor's part a little bit.

However, N. B. went ahead with his daily routine of preserving his dignity. He would cross bridges when he came to them, and as to asking anything so crazy as a trip to the moon of him—well—it was silly!

All this impossible claptrap was ridiculous! Had he not expressed his attitude openly in his letter of acceptance of membership in the Scientific Academy of America and were they not all coming, so he had been notified, to call upon him soon?

N. B. had his secretary at once arrange to receive these noted men on next Tuesday afternoon.

CHAPTER VI.

A MATTER OF STATE.

TUESDAY afternoon was in reality N. B.'s first reception, and it proved a brilliant affair. His aid, Lieutenant Ronalds, all agleam in full army dress, received the guests and the distinguished gentlemen of the Scientific Academy of America filed into the drawing-room, where Eggelbert took their individual cards and handed them to Zanzebar.

Zanzebar, the Mameluke, stood in front of the door leading into Napoleon's private chambers. The massive black, in his gorgeous Oriental costume and with his scimitar shining at his side, made an imposing picture of a guard at a portal.

The first intimation which N. B. had that anything unusual was occurring was when Ronalds came in to see if he was in readiness for the occasion. N. B.'s private door opened sharply and, Zanzebar closely following, Ronalds entered. Then Zanzebar stepped out again quickly and closed the door behind him.

There was quite an impressive military snap to the way they both handled this trivial little matter.

N. B. knew positively, however, that something big was doing from Ronalds's erect military attitude, kept up there in private and from his somber countenance.

"This is a very solemn moment in my association with your excellency!" stated the lieutenant gravely. "May I announce your excellency?"

"Why, yes," answered Napoleon, "but what is the big idea?"

"You are about to enter upon further triumphs, but I must let them tell you!"

N. B. walked somberly behind Ronalds to the door, and there the lieutenant instantly traded positions by dropping behind him. Another medal or some further mark of distinction would not particularly aggravate him, N. B. supposed.

The terrible Mameluke salaamed low as the private door opened and there stepped out, before the gentlemen assembled, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett. He was very slender of stature, almost frail, and his skin was slightly pallid from not getting enough sunshine lately.

In view of the herculean task which these men were about to ask of him, he seemed to them, on the instant of his appearance, a subject for pity rather than the most phenomenally resourceful man alive as he was supposed to be, but that was before they caught what was imprinted upon his face and before his piercing gaze began sweeping over them. It was an expression of severity and interrogation which cannot be described.

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For the eyes of Napoleon saw a dozen or so men correctly attired, with the ribbon of the Legion of Honor and various other decorations on their breasts. Each one of these obviously distinguished fellows was standing frozen in his tracks, shoulders back, head erect, all looking upon him as if they were actually charmed by his presence.

"Sire," spoke Ronalds, having evidently caught up with the proper title for this occasion as Napoleon promoted himself from day to day and now from minute to minute in the lieutenant's estimation, "I have the honor to present Mr. Roland Klenderman—"

A gentleman stepped from his place, bowed stiffly from the waist, and returned to his former position as immobile as before.

"Mr. Geoffrey Denton—" This gentleman did likewise. "Dr. Roland Kobbleton, Mr. D. G. Smithsonwhite—" who each followed suit, as did Mr. Alexander Kristman, the Hon. Otto Desselwelt, and gradually there was coming before the conqueror of time and space the full membership of the society.

After his first scathing inspection, from which he had not been able to glean anything, N. B. regarded these callers coldly with only that vague light in his eyes for which he was now becoming famous. As a matter of fact while they were so formally bowing before him N. B. was looking at each one blankly.

Then what he in some way or another dreaded came with the name of the last member presented. This gentleman, trying as he best could to be passive and not display any considerable emotion, was batting his eyes very nervously.

"Professor Enoch Bridport!" sang out the ceremonious Lieutenant Ronalds.

As if caught in a blind alley beyond all hope of extricating himself, but now truly eagle-eyed, N. B. watched the near-sighted old professor. It was scarcely necessary for him to state his business—N. B. knew what it was!

Professor Bridport bowed stiffly as much as he could like the others from the hips and began a carefully prepared speech:

"We can hardly express to you, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett, the appreciation of this society for the honor you have conferred upon it in inviting us humble men of the abstract sciences to be your first guests.

"Even as you have brought your tremendous ability, the equal of which I dare say no other man has ever possessed, into practically demonstrating the theories of Le Faire, so now we see in your expressed preference for our society both in your kind letter and your specific invitation to visit you personally, your inclination also to prove for us some of our great dreams and theories which live at present only in our hearts."

The situation was getting acute for Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett. Why in the devil was not Le Faire here to protect him when, as, and if necessary, he had so devoutly promised? These three dummies, his aid Lieutenant Ronalds, frozen beyond all feeling by the weight of the ceremonies, Eggelbert his cockney servant, over in the corner literally hypnotized by the pomp of it all, and Zanzebar, so terrible and courageous in his appearance—and that only—were worse than useless in these critical circumstances.

N. B. knew he would have to answer something very soon and who or what could help him out of this dilemma?

"The gentlemen of the academy have been so kind as by unanimous vote," the professor was rambling on, his eyelids closing tight for a rest as he made each point, "to give me the first claim on your illustrious services!

"You are about to be invited to journey into a totally unexplored realm beyond man's conception, a mystic realm, at a rate which will appeal greatly to your vivid imagination. You will travel in a state of grandeur and at a speed such as man has never before conceived, out—out—out—through the limitless spaces to your unutterable glory!"

"Yes! Yes!" N. B. told himself dizzily. "I know what you mean! Why don't you, you doddering old fool, say it, and get the agony of all this suspense over?"

"Your destination, I can assure you,"

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the other continued, "will be wrapped in a conclave of fantastic lights, colors, shadows. Things will not be as on this mundane sphere. I have the honor to invite you, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett, to take a trip to the moon! And I place at your disposal my commodious rocket for that purpose."

There was a brief interval while with heads thrown back dramatically these savants looked proudly upon the one potential conqueror of space.

For this long moment to him, Napoleon's gaze held them spellbound with its utterly vague and abstract expression. It was uncanny to every one, the way his stupendous mind, no doubt fired by Professor Bridport's vivid description, at once took flight from his surroundings and soared into space unending, probably to the very moon itself, they thought.

As one of the gentlemen present later expressed it, "he became instantly as one absolutely apart from them all" and no words could have been truer literally.

His gaze was wholly and positively inscrutable as his nimble mind jumped from one worthless straw to another.

For this modern Napoleon was facing a mighty crisis.

Should he accept, it looked like Waterloo all too soon, and his St. Helena was the moon, if anything, with nothing like the transportation facilities that the first Napoleon had enjoyed.

Should he refuse, it meant ruin and disgrace, about equally as painful to him as a silly victory in death! Would reënforcements never come up?

N. B. felt he was walking on eggshells. He could not even hesitate much longer without losing his dignity.

Lord! If something would only turn up to help him! Oh, where, where was Le Faire? Maybe he yet would come in and stop this horrible thing!

The scientists were leaning forward now to catch his first words—to Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett they were like the English and Germans in the saddle swooping down on the fallen emperor.

"Merciful heavens!" he exclaimed inwardly. "Won't somebody do something or come to help me?" Yet little as N. B. knew it or ever did exactly understand it, something was coming very sensationally to help him.

"This, which I wa-wa-was asking you—" the professor began.

"Oh, yes! Yes!" Napoleon was desperate now. But he must keep up the bluff.

"This little trip to the moon! Eh! I'll take it under advisement. I'll send my engineer up to New Sharon and then I'll communicate with you."

The learned gentlemen passed out quietly, almost reverently. Left alone, N. B. sank listlessly into a chair.

It seemed that the last props of his house of cards had gone. He crumpled up weakly—just a tired and frail boy burdened with circumstance; without any intentional fault of his own, he was condemned by public opinion to a futile and deadly trip to the moon!

For a few moments the weight of the perilous situation seemed to have crushed him altogether as he sat limply huddled there, staring blankly before him. Then a grim glow stirred in his eyes and in his desperation thoughts began to leap full-grown into his mind.

"Napoleon must have been in tighter scrapes than even this at times," ruminated N. B., "and he got out of all of them at least alive. Now how would Napoleon get out of a thing like this, if he were alive today, had taken my airplane ride instead of conquering Italy, was sitting right here in this chair, and a pack of fools had pushed a trip to the moon on him? I bet you he would beat them some way!"

There was only one thing which could save him, and that was strategy. He had said he would send down his engineer to look this prospect over and he would. He smiled broadly as he drew a telegraph blank to him, and wrote:

MR. CHARLES LANGFORD,
Northberry, Vermont.

Report to me at once. All expenses will be defrayed, but keep cool until further orders. NAPOLEON, B. L.

When Le Faire came in, Napoleon was in high spirits. He picked up the snuff box

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which lay open on the table and eloquently offered it to his tardy ally. Then he sent out his servants once more.

"General Blucher," N. B. paraphrased facetiously from the history of Napoleon, "you are a little late coming up! I have just faced Waterloo and I have practically committed myself to the tender mercies of a trip to the moon! The scientific society, which visited me to-day, brought the invitation."

"You don't mean—anything so foolish as that!" Le Faire stammered in alarm.

"If you are that crazy," he declared after the first shock of his surprise was over, "I'll suggest a little more sensible exercise for you. Something you might actually do, too! I'll put a refrigerating jacket on my airplane engine and maybe you can better the record you have already made!"

"No, thank you!" resolutely declared N. B. "I am not volunteering for anything that requires getting more than one foot off the ground at the same time—that's my new motto and I mean it; but listen to this predicament I've got myself into. How am I to get out of it in a condition fit to live? It looks as if I have badly overplayed this Napoleon stuff and that I am now elected literally to ride my own star to death!"

N. B. related all that had happened, while Le Faire continually berated himself for his neglect. The scientific society had simply impressed his guardian as being such a harmless affair and its members bored him so near to extinction that he had purposely absented himself to avoid their tiresome company.

Now, in view of the startling developments, the old inventor could not forgive himself for his failure to shield his protegé in every way possible.

"This is serious business," he declared. "I do want to see the airplane program go over down in Washington, but your hide is dearer to me than that!"

His voice became gruff.

"Chuck all this foolishness! You are released from any promise to me. The game is over. Let's drop this fool Napoleon business! Issue a statement and tell them the truth!"

"What!" yelled N. B., instantly flaring up in anger. "When I have made all these pretensions to greatness! Do you think for a moment I would step off a sinking ship like a rat, especially when this boat is partly yours! A rat is just what I would be, too, when the public got through with me! Why do you suppose I am smiling in the face of this thing?"

"God knows!" declared Le Faire. "If you were anybody but yourself I'd say it was because you were raving crazy! What do you intend to do?"

N. B. pushed the snuff box away from him. No wonder Napoleon looked so fierce—taking that darned stuff all the time!

"I'll tell you what I am going to do." He measured his words soberly.

"So far we have been having a little child's play. I imagine there are a lot of people standing around who consider me a big hollow image and who are smiling up their sleeves while they wait for something like this to shatter me to pieces. Here is where they are all going to get badly fooled!

"They are going to get a little strategy of the real Napoleon. It is a matter of fact that Napoleon left one army to die in Egypt and another in Russia and he handled it so adroitly that the fools loved him for it! I am just going to give these people a dose of the real Napoleon so that they, too, will like it."

"I don't know what you are driving at!" declared Le Faire. "But I'll bet you put it over, whatever it is! However, if you want to get through with all this foolishness right now by chucking it all before anything dangerous happens, I am for you!"

"I am lying down to sleep now," answered N. B. complacently. "My engineer on this campaign will arrive shortly. I must be rested and ready for our practical conference on this lunar matter."

Le Faire tiptoed out.

Ten P.M. brought Charles Langford. Men came quickly when Napoleon summoned them.

N. B. arose from a sound sleep and was at once closeted with this gentleman, but he admitted Mr. Le Faire to their consultation.

"Mr. Le Faire, one of the most constructive of men," N. B. presented them to

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each other, "meet Mr. Langford, one of the most destructive of men. No disrespect to your worth, Charlie! Your ability is about to be utilized at once!"

Both men drew in their breath sharply.

"Do you know Señorita Anita Gomez," Napoleon asked his new engineer, "or Lieutenant Ronalds?"

"No, sir!" answered Charlie.

"Very well," announced the new Napoleon. "Your statement stands uncontested. We shall take up things as they are now!"

N. B. extended to Langford the last edition of one of the afternoon newspapers. Across its front page was spread:

NAPOLEON B. L. RECEIVES NOMINATION FOR TRIP TO MOON

"You have read all this?" asked N. B.

"Yes," replied Langford. "I have read every paper printed since I got your wire."

N. B. wrote out an introduction to Professor Enoch Bridport.

"Charlie Langford!" he said as he passed it over, "you are the engineer mentioned in the papers. I am employing you to examine this rocket, and, if possible, take complete charge of it for me! Report to me as quickly as possible! I might say that any suggestions—ah!—ahem!—I might say that any suggestions which you might have as to the use of your remarkable ability for getting other people into trouble—if you should get extremely agitated, for instance, around that rocket and absolutely out of my sight—ah—ah—ahem—it would be appreciated!"

N. B. threw some bills across the table, about all he had in fact, and told Engineer Charles Langford that Professor Bridport would pay handsomely for his distinguished services.

"Gee!" exclaimed the new engineer. "It's a great relief to know you are still human! I was getting almost afraid of you! I am sure I shall enjoy this job."

The *Morning Ages* carried the next day:

NAPOLEON BONAPARTE LUCKETT FACES TEST WORTHY OF HIS REPUTATION

Its news columns, which always stated things conservatively, left to the imagination, however, many things about this moon trip which the other papers were so kind as to supply for Napoleon.

An example of how much of a reality his moon trip was in the talk of the street was impressed upon N. B. by a remark of his Mameluke.

"Mr. Napoleon," Zanzebar asked politely, "is you going to ride dis heah sky rocket like a hoss or is you gwine inside of it like it was a whale?"

Within twenty-four hours Charlie Langford reported back and was at once taken into executive council. Charlie was smiling all over himself, and this gave N. B. new courage. Evidently the leaven of his idea was working.

Charlie produced reports, pictures, charts, and explained the great experiment in detail.

"Here is the gist of the whole thing," he summarized. "Professor Bridport has an enormous sky rocket which, charged with ten thousand pounds of mixed high explosives, will project itself some great distance into space. However, it has only to go fifty miles to clear completely all the air which encircles our earth as well as the heaviest pull of our gravitation. The moment the air pressure encircling our globe is passed the rocket will meet with little further resistance, and consequently, having only to contend with our speedily diminishing gravity behind it, the momentum remaining in the thing will catapult it through space at a terrific rate.

"Of course, the rocket will be fired in a direct trajectory with the moon—in the straightest possible path to hit the moon squarely—but even this is of no great importance. Once the projectile is speeding fleetly through pure ether the gravity of the moon will be the next attraction for it, and it will go directly to its destination by natural laws.

"The passenger chamber of the rocket in which you would ride is a small, very carefully padded, capsule affair very similar in shape to a large bullet. This fits so nicely into the head of the rocket; it is so well insulated; it is so perfectly balanced and protected from concussion of the explosion that you will not be injured from these little things, but, excuse me for saying so, you

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have got about as much chance of your life on this journey as the proverbial snowball!"

"It is perfectly remarkable," commented the new Napoleon blandly, "how we do agree on some things!"

"However," Charlie continued, "this old fool, Professor Bridport's heart, will be broken if you do not go. You have, if I may say so—ah—a—a—such a tremendous reputation that you are compelled to vindicate it, and I do not see just how you can get out of at least attempting to satisfy this preposterous demand upon you. I might say, though, that all in all, the situation is not beyond hope, and that it appeals to me as a most wonderful opportunity for a man to rise in the world."

"I thought it would," answered Napoleon. "It would seem to require a little strategy on our part to satisfy every one, including myself."

"That is the word, 'strategy,' and if I may suggest it, this is what I have done. Here is the complete solution of the whole thing."

N. B.'s eyes lighted up. It was coming out just the way he expected. The seed which he had planted in the fertile soil of Charlie's mind was sprouting quickly.

"I have taken full charge of the rocket," Charlie announced, "and I am having a duplicate passenger chamber—capsule—bullet, or whatever you want to call it, made for you. All you have to do on the day appointed is make them a nice speech, get in the chamber provided, and I'll exchange the one you are in for its duplicate. I'll then shoot the dummy and hide the one you are in, in a smoke screen or by some other means. That is the only way you can hope to go to the moon and satisfy everybody!"

"You have every bit of the genius with which I credited you," grinned Napoleon, "but what have you in mind for me after I come out of hiding—if I come out?"

"Well," was the reply, "I have taken that point into consideration, too. I shall drop you under the stand or put you in the storehouse for extra parts for the time being. Late that night I'll take you to some lonely spot and keep you secreted for a month or so. Then we shall arrange for you to come back. 'You are safely back from the moon,' the word will flash out everywhere, and your fame will be enormous.

"You with your story can be a sort of another Dr. Cook, who, as you remember, represented himself to have discovered the North Pole. You can clean up a fortune and you will have no trouble lecturing because whatever you may tell the people, it will be more than anybody else knows about your subject, which will be, of course, what's on the moon!

"With your tremendous reputation everybody will readily believe you, and if you are found out most people would still believe you had been to the moon, just as lots of people to-day still think Dr. Cook discovered the North Pole."

A smile illuminated Napoleon's countenance. It was the first happy feeling that he had experienced in some time.

Here really was the means for which he was searching to hold up his proud rôle in face of the crisis that confronted him. Truly he did not like the idea of lying in his lectures upon his return.

The fact of the matter was N. B. determined then and there that he would not do that—he would not lecture at all—he did not have to. There was nothing to prevent him from merely keeping quiet as he had done on his first famous exploit.

What N. B. was trying so desperately to do, even more than save himself from ridicule, was to save his friend—just to remain in his grandiloquent rôle as long as possible for the sake of his good old comrade, Le Faire, until the latter could at least get his airplane campaign fully launched.

"Splendid!" declared N. B., having turned Charlie's proposition over in his mind without finding any fishhook in it. "We are going to put our light under a bushel and have it shine, too! That's about what I need! How much do you want now for your services?"

"I really could take nothing further from you," Charlie Langford informed him. "Professor Bridport has insisted on hiring me and I never saw a man so anxious to buy the rope for his own hangman! But

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he may get big value yet. Some little piece of funny colored rock which you can pick up in Central Park will set him wild with happiness if you tell him it came from the moon. All I want is to thank you for this wonderful opportunity. My services will be in great demand after this thing is over and my charges will be out of sight even as my work shall have been."

That night Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett issued a bulletin. His words were:

"Subject to the approval of all transportation machinery in every detail and particular by my engineer, Charles Langford, upon whom I greatly rely in this matter, I accept the invitation of the Scientific Academy of America to visit the moon."

The press made it a subject of wild acclamation. There was something superhuman in the redoubtable spirit of this phenomenal young man who readily picked up one of the most stinging gantlets that had ever been thrown down.

"May Napoleon Bonarparte Luckett return to us," said the *Morning Ages,* "that we may have at least one such specimen of our species with us on earth; but if it is to death he goes, it is a noble death! His interment shall be in a grander sepulcher than man has ever before conceived—that of limitless space."

This magnanimity on the part of so conservative a paper touched N. B. deeply. He gulped. He felt that he was a niggardly fake—a very little man. It seemed such a pity to take advantage of so much confidence in him, especially from people who had been intelligent enough to doubt him before.

One thing, though, he firmly vowed again—he would not under any circumstances give lying lectures upon "his return from the moon."

CHAPTER VII.

AN ASCENDING STAR.

THE day set aside for Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett's ascent arrived, with the hero apparently the least excited of all concerned.

Napoleon motored slowly up to New Sharon, through long lanes of sometimes fiercely applauding, sometimes weirdly silent throngs.

To most of the public mind heaven was up there somewhere in the direction that Napoleon was going and he had demonstrated his ability for speed in the clouds very auspiciously—very auspiciously, indeed!

The large black limousine in which Napoleon rode, his formal cortège behind him, and the cars bearing various escorting committees which followed only crept along.

In the whole entourage and its somber dignity there was just one bright note of color, and that was Zanzebar, N. B.'s Mameluke. He rode in the motor with N. B. himself, for he was to form a conspicuous part of every procession from now on.

He shone above all the rest of Napoleon's staff by the glitter of his rich Oriental costume and his natural ugliness above it. The sight of him alone, especially as he was publicly being seen for the first time, produced a prodigious effect upon the people.

Le Faire sat beside N. B., with the gallant Lieutenant Ronalds, master of masters at all ceremonies, just across from him. These were for N. B. ever reliable buffers to ward off any undue familiarity. N. B. at present had not the slightest doubt but that familiarity would breed contempt in his case.

On the outskirts of New Sharon, the procession drew up on a vast field, out of the center of which arose something so tall that N. B. absent-mindedly thought it was a grain elevator or a silo, such as he had seen on Western farms. Then the realization came to him that this was the skyrocket itself.

While he looked at this huge piece of fireworks built very much in the shape of an enormous Roman candle or a great cartridge with its large emplacements and anchorages of masonry for distributing the shock of its recoil, N. B. was doubly glad that he had sidestepped the necessity of having to ride in the thing. N. B. felt thankful to Charlie in an extraordinary degree for the clever strategy which had

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delivered him from the mouth of this monster.

There was another impressive committee in frock coats to meet him here, led by Professor Bridport. A word had to be said to the press. N. B. grasped Charlie Langford's hand. Gee, it was comforting to see the cool, steady look in his eyes—and then N. B. begged a few minutes for a personal inspection of the rocket.

Charlie led N. B. around this monstrous thing, and then brought Napoleon up and out upon a platform in front of the rocket.

Before them, lying flat on this platform, were two bullet-shaped compartments, one tightly closed, one open, and both exactly alike to every outward appearance. Charlie kicked one carelessly and spoke under his breath:

"You go in one. Then I hoist up its dummy duplicate; clear this platform away, being careful to take you with me in a smoke screen; and I shoot off the works!"

"You are mighty cool about this," said N. B.

"There is nothing to get heated up over. It is simple as can be."

"I hope you are right!" replied N. B.

They went down from the platform and joined the several committees on another stand.

Amid the prolonged acclamation of the crowd which had gathered to witness this sensational spectacle, Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett arose before them. He spoke:

"Gentlemen of the committees, brother members of the Scientific Academy of America, and people in general: I come before you humbly to attempt to rise literally to a height somewhat near that of the lofty confidence which you have placed in me."

A thunder of mighty applause broke loose and a radio man took advantage of this to change one of the three microphones before him. From a sound-proof booth another announcer told the world at large:

"He is standing easily. One foot is crossed jauntily over the other. A whimsical smile is playing on his lips. On this day of days and at this moment of all moments he is in a holiday mood. So does your ambassador to the moon, your very own peerless son, Napoleon, turn his face to the heavens and bravely face his destiny!"

When this swell of loud cheering subsided, N. B. continued:

"But in this I do not promise success. There is a limit to human capacity for accomplishment, and yet out of the fullness of your hearts you would have me believe that I can do 'most anything. Much as I appreciate all this ardor on your part, I regret to inform you that your opinion of me is not exactly correct.

"I am human. The most that I can say is that I shall do the best I can to satisfy you all, and when I return"—Napoleon turned his gaze upon the huge rocket behind him, particularly upon the platform around it, and then he looked down upon Charlie, sitting near him—"and when I return, if I do return, please always remember my last words to-day.

"Gentlemen," he added loudly, "I am now off to determine whether the moon is really made of green cheese! Surely some of us must be mistaken on this serious question? Sometimes I think the whole world exists for no higher purpose than to settle such vexatious problems!"

And he kept his face straight while he stepped down amid a roaring farewell.

A few strode across the concrete buttressed field with him. Again Napoleon climbed the platform of the giant rocket with Charlie Langford close beside him. This time Professor Bridport and several scientific gentlemen were with them.

There was a lot of screwing around of big wheels and squinting at astronomical instruments, but these things were not nearly of so much interest to N. B. as locating that extra cylinder. When his eyes fell on it once more it seemed to comfort him.

There was a lot of handshaking and last-minute good-bys, which N. B. took nonchalantly, to the great amazement of the others present.

They put him in one of those big bullet-like cylinders. It was surprisingly comfortable in there. A nice soft seat he had—and then those scientific fellows began to screw a big cap on his nice cylinder. Some-

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thing like a diver's helmet, it was, with a wicket in front of it.

N. B. did not like this close confinement so much, although it was still very comfortable inside. He guessed, nevertheless, that he could stay in the confounded thing under some platform or in some tool house for eight or ten hours for the glory of the entire world.

Then he heard somebody shout:

"Ready!"

Instantly the little wicket of his cylinder was shut tight. His eyes were blinded to what was going on. He heard the scuffling of feet on the platform.

There was a moment of intense silence, except that he could faintly hear his container scraping around and bumping against things. He distinctly felt himself being moved.

Good old Charlie was switching those containers. Already he knew he was off that platform.

N. B. yawned and stretched himself out comfortably for the long wait.

Afterward, Charlie Langford could not tell just exactly how it all happened, but that was scarcely necessary. The results spoke for themselves. Charlie said that he threw out a good smoke screen while removing one container and hoisting and placing the other in the top of the rocket.

For N. B.'s part, he was merely sitting very calmly in his softly cushioned cabinet, completely isolated from everything and everybody. He was actually considering how perfectly agreeable it was to be so safely removed from that howling crowd outside and what they would have him do. N. B. was feeling very much at ease when his pleasant contemplations were broken in upon by something like an earthquake.

There was a resounding crash. Ten thousand pounds of gun cotton and mixed high explosives went off under N. B. in a hardened brass giant cannon with a painful, paralyzing clamor. For a fleet second something suffocating was rising up under him.

In this confused instant he sensed that his soul was soaring through space. Anything he carried more than that was dead weight. His bones had doubled up like rubber. He fainted. Napoleon Bonaparte Luckett was on his way to—to the moon!

The billows of smoke at last cleared away from where the rocket had been. Only a great empty smoking hull was left—its empty muzzle pointing dismally to the heavens and its discharge already invisible.

From far back among the sky gazers in the crowd came a plaintive, moaning wail from Zanzebar:

"Lordy! Lordy! Oh, Lordy! Be good to him now!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

WHEN WEST WAS YOUNG

PRAIRIE dotted gold and green,
Movin' white, a schooner seen—
Rollin' land to distant cloud,
There they stand, their heads are bowed,
Ho'ses bony pullin' trace,
Parted flap and peerin' face,
Voice a-cooin' lullaby,
Creakin' wagon rumbles sigh;
Stars a-blinkin', coyotes yap!
Babe asleep in mother's lap,
Father smokin', fire a-gleam,
Soddy wall close by is seen,
Morrow sees their home complete,
Soddy shack laid up so neat—
Homestead entry has begun,
In the days when West was young.

Harvey Kelly Wilson.

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The Whistling Waddy Wades In

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

THROUGH the shadowy darkness that hung over the starlit trail there came the sounds of a horse walking slowly and some one whistling musically—trilling birdlike notes which voiced the melody of the "Old Oaken Bucket."

As the trail wound past a weatherbeaten log cabin the lone rider abruptly ceased his whistling and reined in his horse. For a moment he sat there staring at the structure.

From a lean, tanned face, keen blue eyes gazed beneath the brim of a wide black Stetson that was battered and worn, and straight, sensitive lips grew tight. "Solitaire" Stevens, known far and wide across the range as the Whistling Waddy, had found something that was not to his liking.

A strange, taciturn sort of an individual, Stevens refused to work for any of the ranchers whom he knew and who would have been glad of his services, for Solitaire was known to be an excellent puncher, and a man with a reputation as a broncho-buster as well. But he preferred to ride the range from the border to the remote sections to the north, always whistling and alone.

There was only one man who could really claim that Solitaire Stevens was his friend, and that was Jerry Grimshaw, a gruff old prospector in front of whose cabin the whistling waddy now sat upon his horse in thoughtful silence.

For three years now it had been the custom for Solitaire to come riding back from remote places every six months to spend an interval with Jerry Grimshaw. Always the latter had known when to expect him and had been there at the cabin waiting to welcome him. But to-night the place was dark and silent.

Suddenly Solitaire grinned.

"Reckon th' ole billy-goat done lost track of time!" he murmured softly to himself as he dismounted. "Bet ya he's sleepin' an' dead tuh th' world!"

He moved cautiously to the door of the cabin and then flung it open abruptly.

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"Pile out, yuh ole reprobate!" he said, as he peered into the darkness. "Yuh got company!"

There was no answer from within the cabin, and Solitaire's grin changed to a frown as he entered and struck a match. He looked about him.

The place appeared the same as it had when he had last seen it six months ago, but there was no sign of Jerry Grimshaw.

The puncher moved over to a rough wooden table which stood against the wall in one corner of the room. He struck another match and lit the lantern which rested upon a pile of odds and ends scattered upon the table. As the light gleamed forth Solitaire glanced about him again.

Near the two bunks which the place possessed stood Grimshaw's rifle, and his old battered felt hat hung upon a nail near by. Stevens grew very thoughtful as he stared at those two objects. He was beginning to have an ominous feeling that something had happened to the old prospector.

Casually he took the hat down and looked at it. As he did so he spied a rolled bit of paper thrust into the hatband. He opened it and read the penciled scrawl slowly.

Solitare: Found rich strike. Eagle knows. If I ain't here when you come—they got me! Avenge! JERRY.

"Hell!" murmured Solitaire softly. "Looks like I done arrived a little late, partner!" He looked again at the note. "Eagle, huh? I don't know who that jasper is, but it sure sounds like an Indian!" He began to whistle softly, as he always did when he was thinking deeply.

Finally he shrugged his shoulders.

"Reckon I better unsaddle Pete," he decided. "We're gonna bunk here for th' night an' go huntin' eagles in the mornin'!"

II.

THE light of early day found Solitaire exceedingly busy. After a hasty cooked breakfast from the small supply of foodstuff that Jerry Grimshaw had left behind him the whistling waddy proceeded to look over the vicinity.

There were two things he wanted to be positive about. The first and most vital of these was just what had happened to his friend, and the second, the location of the gold strike which the prospector had mentioned.

Four years ago Grimshaw had become convinced that there was gold to be found in Lost Hope Cañon. With the patience and determination of the hardened old desert rat that he was, he had erected his little cabin and made up his mind to stay in the vicinity of the cañon until he had made his strike.

Now Solitaire judged that after four years of earnest and painstaking search the old man's dream had been realized, but his elation must have been short lived, for those vultures in human flesh who prey upon the success of others had followed in the wake of Jerry Grimshaw and taken from him that for which he had struggled so hard.

There was no sign which might aid him in the vicinity of the cabin, and frowning, Solitaire saddled his horse and rode slowly toward the entrance of the cañon. This was a narrow opening barely wide enough for a horse and rider to pass through.

Beyond, it opened up into a small, spoon-shaped valley and was surrounded on three sides by high, precipitous rocks. Save by climbing these there was no way in or out of Lost Hope Cañon except the narrow opening through which Stevens had just come.

The wandering puncher smiled mirthlessly as he glanced about him. The place would prove excellent for a hideout should one be necessary.

Solitaire had a feeling that one man combating an uncertain number of unknown foes would be wise to bear such a retreat in mind. A single individual who was an exceptionally good marksman could withstand quite a siege, were he to station himself at a judicious position at the cañon entrance. It was a little detail worth remembering.

He turned a slight bend in the rocky wall beside which he was riding. He cursed softly and drew his horse to a halt as he caught sight of a worn black boot sticking

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out from a little clump of sagebrush to his right.

As he dismounted and moved toward it Solitaire's right hand was upon the butt of one of his guns, but instinct told him that it was a useless and unnecessary precaution. He tugged at the boot, and at first he could not move it. He increased the effort and drew the limp form of Jerry Grimshaw out into the sunlight.

The old, gray-haired prospector was cold and still, a bullet hole in his wrinkled forehead. He had evidently been dead for some little time. At least twenty-four hours, the puncher judged.

"Damn them!" murmured Solitaire. "I'll make them pay for this if it's th' last thing I ever do! I'll get 'em, Jerry, old boy! Every blasted one of 'em!"

Suddenly as he stood there Solitaire started to whistle very softly, a strange, plaintive tune—that was, somehow, the song of death!

III.

A RED sun was slipping slowly behind the mountains as a horseman rode into the little town called Drifting City. A man whose eyes were hard as he gazed about him warily. Solitaire Stevens was looking for a person called "Eagle."

As the tall, dust-covered puncher stepped into the bar of the Glad Hand Saloon, Higgins, the fat, wall-eyed barkeeper glanced up from the tattered magazine he was reading and nodded.

"Evenin'," he said in a voice which was much too high and shrill for a man of his proportions.

With a quick glance Solitaire saw that himself and the fat man were the only ones present. He nodded curtly as he ordered.

As he placed the drink in front of the stranger, Higgins observed many little details about the man on the opposite side of the bar. The two heavy guns which hung low on his hips, and the open holsters which were tied to each leg by a bit of rawhide thong, the grim face with the set lips and the cold eyes registered upon the mind of the barkeeper and left him wondering and a bit uncertain.

The uncertainty changed swiftly to acute alarm as a broad-shouldered, gorillalike individual entered, followed by a tall, hard-faced, black-haired man.

For a long time Dan Greer and Jack Crawford had menaced the town of Drifting City, and they were not partial to strangers. Higgins scented trouble, and his was a peace-loving nature.

Dan Greer, the gorillalike gentleman, paused for an instant and stared at Solitaire, but a word from Crawford made him move forward so that he now stood at the bar on Stevens's left, while Crawford was at the whistling waddy's right as the two men ordered.

Solitaire's eyes narrowed as he noticed the positions which the two men had taken. But he said nothing as he swallowed his drink and ordered a second. This he quietly and calmly finished.

"Pardon me, gents," he said finally, turning so that his back was toward the bar. "Has either of yuh ever heard of an ole feller named Jerry Grimshaw?"

Solitaire was looking at Crawford as he spoke, and he saw the latter give a faint, barely perceptible start at the mention of the old prospector's name. Then the dark-haired man smiled and shook his head.

"No," he replied. "Can't say I have. Is he from around here?"

"Yea!" Solitaire nodded. "Leastwise, he was th' last time I heard of him. I ain't seen him for nearly a year—guess th' old idiot has gone wanderin' somewhere after gold again!"

"Reckon so!" said Crawford, with something like relief in his tone. "Yuh say he's a prospector, eh?"

"No, I didn't say it!" Solitaire grinned. "But he is! An ole-timer."

"Yuh never can tell 'bout them ole-timers," remarked Dan Greer. "They're here tuh-day an' gone tuh-morrow."

"Ain't it so?" Solitaire nodded. "I'd kinda hate tuh think that ole Jerry was gone, though," he added quietly, and he made the words sound ominous. "Grimshaw an' me was right good friends; an' I always aim tuh stand by my friends!"

"Yes, I guess a feller does sort of expect their friends tuh stick by." Crawford

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nodded. "But sometimes it's dangerous to do it."

"It sure is!" said Greer. "Damn dangerous!"

"Meaning anything special?" asked Solitaire casually.

"No." Crawford shook his head. "Just talkin', that's all.

"Uh-huh!" remarked Stevens. "Funny thing, ain't it, how a feller gets talkin' 'bout nothin'!" He grinned. "Just th' other day I was chinnin' to a jasper 'bout eagles—an' he said that one of them with clipped wings wasn't worth a tin hoot. I agreed."

Before the others could speak Solitaire tossed a coin on the bar and moved out.

As Dan Greer looked at Crawford the latter frowned and shook his head.

IV.

BENEATH the canopy of black darkness which hung over the cloudy, starless night a horse and rider rode slowly along the road which led away from Drifting City. Every once in awhile the horseman glanced over his shoulder as though expecting pursuit.

Once he reined in his mount and sat there listening for a moment. In the distance he heard the faint clatter of horses' hoofs.

Solitaire Stevens smiled mirthlessly and rode into the shelter of a clump of trees beside the road. His lips were puckered into the faintest of whistles as he dismounted and made sure that both he and his horse were out of sight of any one passing along the road.

From his pocket he drew a bright little object. It was part of a watch-fob made from a linked chain of silver dollars, the heads of which had been molded so that they stood out in bold relief. To this he tied a white handkerchief, then swiftly and silently he moved out and placed it upon the road at a spot where it might readily be seen.

He had hardly returned to his hiding place when the sound of the approaching horses grew nearer. He peered out as he heard voices and listened intently as two men appeared riding slowly along the road.

"He went this way, I'm sure of that!" he heard the gorillalike man he had seen in the saloon say. "So he's a friend of ole Grimshaw's, eh! Well, he's gonna find that ain't so healthy."

"He strikes me as dangerous," remarked Jack Crawford. "He meant something by that crack of his about eagles."

"Yea!" Dan Greer snorted disdainfully. "He better watch his step if he wants tuh live tuh an ole age!"

The two men were now passing the spot where the whistling waddy was hidden. Silently Solitaire drew his guns and covered the two, but he did not indicate his presence by the slightest sound.

"What's that?" exclaimed Crawford suddenly, as he spied the handkerchief upon the road. He halted his horse and dismounted. "That's funny!" he said as he picked it up.

"What is it?" asked Greer, who had also halted.

"Why, it's part of the Eagle's watch-fob," answered Crawford, examining his find.

"Huh! What yuh reckon it's doin' here?"

"I don't know." Crawford shook his head. "Unless that stranger found it an' then dropped it again."

"If he did, then he knows what happened tuh Grimshaw! Th' Eagle said he lost it in th' cañon."

"Then there's gonna be hell tuh pay when that stranger meets th' Eagle!" remarked Crawford as he mounted and rode on.

Solitaire stood there with guns drawn, a black scowl on his face until the two men were out of sight. He had thought that Jack Crawford was the Eagle. Finally he sighed, and again from his lips there issued that soft mournful whistle that was the song of death!

V.

"HASH" HIGGINS, the fat, wall-eyed barkeeper of the Glad Hand Saloon, was thinking deeply. The effort was rather a strain upon his meager mentality, but he felt the little bit of byplay which he had observed earlier in the evening was food of thought.

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The conversation he had overheard between the stranger and the two men who were known as the most dangerous and ruthless in the vicinity interested him greatly.

Higgins had seen Crawford and Greer leave shortly after the two-gun man had departed, and something in their expressions had foretold a most unpleasant evening for the stranger. The barkeeper sighed and then shuddered.

His was a peace loving nature, and the vision he had conjectured of the stranger lying along the trail riddled with bullets was not a pretty one.

He turned and then stood staring, open-mouthed with amazement as the door swung open and the stranger for whom he had just mentally pictured such a gruesome end stepped into the room again.

"If yuh was tuh keep yuhre mouth open like that all th' time," remarked Solitaire, grinning, "it 'd make a right nice fly-trap." He looked intently at Higgins. "What's th' matter? Yuh act like yuh seen a ghost or somethin'!"

Higgins closed his mouth with a snap and mopped his brow with a grimy handkerchief. As the blue eyes of the stranger stared at him coldly he felt a nervous chill pass over him. Higgins was of an exceptionally peace loving nature.

"I thought yuh'd gone," he said inanely.

"Not yet." Solitaire glanced about the room and saw that the only one present, save the barkeeper and himself, was a slender, blond-haired man who sat at a table in a corner idly playing solitaire. "I kinda like it here." He leaned closer to Higgins, and his tone was soft and confidential. "Say, do me a favor, will yuh?"

Higgins looked at Stevens and then nodded mutely.

"Good!" Solitaire smiled. "Then tell me who this jigger is they call th' Eagle!"

Higgins gasped, sputtered, and then made inarticulate sounds in his throat. Suddenly his eyes grew wild with fright and he disappeared beneath the bar.

"Yuh was lookin' for me?" asked a soft, drawling voice behind Solitaire.

The latter turned swiftly, reaching for his guns as he did so. He found himself staring into the muzzle of a heavy Colt in the hand of the slender blond man who had been playing solitaire.

"They calls me th' Eagle," said that individual softly. "An' I'd let them guns alone if I was yuh!"

Solitaire laughed shortly.

"Yuh're right!" he said slowly, withdrawing his hands. As he did so he sized up the man in front of him. "Reckon I make a mistake!" he grinned. "Th' drinks are on me!"

Calmly he turned his back on the other and faced toward the bar.

For an instant the Eagle sat there, his gun pointing at the stranger's back.

The soft-spoken bad man was hard and ruthless, but he possessed a code of his own. A code which was founded upon a vague sense of fair play and admiration for courage.

Slowly he put his gun back in its holster and moved up to the bar. As he did so Higgins appeared from beneath the counter.

"Yuh got guts, stranger," said the Eagle quietly. "I'm drinkin'!"

VI.

As he rode away from the town of Drifting City for the second time that evening Solitaire Stevens was greatly puzzled. The actions of the Eagle struck him as strange.

The man had acted in a very friendly fashion—had even insisted upon buying a second round of drinks. What had been his motive?

That was what worried the whistling waddy: the actions of the soft-speaking, slender blond were not in keeping with the truculent character of the man who had murdered old Jerry Grimshaw for his gold. Yet the old prospector had said that the Eagle had done it.

Not only that, but the two hard-boiled men, Crawford and Greer, were quite obviously the Eagle's henchmen, and they had set out to make things hot for Solitaire.

The puncher came to the conclusion that the man called the Eagle was a very clever

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and dangerous individual. He decided that he had better watch his step, as he was playing a lone and very uncertain hand. The chances so far were three to one against him.

He turned away from the road and rode slowly along the faint trail which led to the cabin of Jerry Grimshaw. Trees and broad expanses of sagebrush lined his path on either side.

Abruptly as he rode past an exceptionally large clump of trees he heard a faint swish. A rope settled over his shoulders and grew tight instantly. He struggled desperately, but to no avail.

From the shadows to his left a man whose face was masked by a blue handkerchief stepped out onto the trail, a drawn revolver in his hand.

"Looks like yuh got me!" said Solitaire angrily, as he ceased struggling. "What's th' game?"

"That's what we're aimin' tuh find out!" answered a second masked man, as he appeared clinging tightly to the rope which pinioned Stevens's arms to his sides.

"Yea!" said the man with the gun. "Yuh been actin' right nosey lately, an' that ain't healthy for strangers tuh do!"

"Uh-huh!" said Solitaire. "Supposin' I was tuh tell yuh that I was a friend of th' Eagle's? That me an' him just been drinkin' together in the bar of th' Glad Hand—what 'd yuh say then?"

"That yuh was a damn liar!" remarked the man with the gun; and Stevens recognized the voice of Jack Crawford.

"All right!" he said. "But yuh ask th' Eagle when yuh see him if what I say ain't true!"

"Sure, an' get cussed out for being a fool!" retorted Dan Greer, who was holding the rope.

"Yuh ought to be used tuh that!" remarked Solitaire.

Suddenly he whistled shrilly. Pete, well trained horse that he was, leaped wildly forward at the sound, striking Crawford a glancing blow that made him spin around and drop his gun.

So startled was Dan Greer that he released his hold on the rope for an instant, but that instant was enough for Solitaire. He jerked the lasso out of the gorillalike man's hands and as he dashed wildly away his two guns flashed flame.

Greer howled as a bullet caught him in the arm, and Crawford sat down suddenly, staring at a trickle of blood which appeared at the edge of his boot top.

Cursing, the two men listened to the rapidly retreating hoofbeats, and above the sound there rose the musical notes of a gayly whistled tune.

VII.

EARLY the next morning Solitaire again rode into Lost Hope Cañon. After he had escaped by wounding the two henchmen of the Eagle he had not been bothered further.

He had spent the rest of the night peacefully sleeping in the cabin of Jerry Grimshaw. Now the puncher was anxious to learn the location of the gold strike which had caused the death of his friend.

That Jerry had found gold somewhere in Lost Hope Cañon he did not doubt, and he was certain that there would be some indication of the spot clearly visible. It was not likely that the Eagle and his men would go to the trouble of murdering the old prospector and then not stake out the claim which had been their motive for the deed.

Still, the more he thought the matter over the more doubtful the whistling waddy became that such would be the case. The spot where Jerry had found gold was no doubt in some rather inaccessible portion of the cañon, otherwise the old prospector would have found it long ago. Therefore it might be a wise move on the part of the Eagle to let the location remain a mystery to all save his own men.

Solitaire wasted most of the forenoon in what proved to be a fruitless search of the spoon-shaped, rock-surrounded valley. He could not find the slightest trace of Grimshaw's claim.

He finally decided that he would wait and then follow one of the Eagle's band when they returned to the cañon, which they undoubtedly would, and let him lead the way to the claim.

The gold did not interest Stevens half as

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much as did the desire to retaliate for what they had done to the man whom he had called his friend. Deep in the whistling waddy's heart there smoldered the angry fires of revenge.

As he rode out through the narrow, rocky entrance to the cañon, Solitaire reined in his horse and stared about him thoughtfully. Finally he smiled.

"Huh!" he remarked. "That looks like right considerable idea! Reckon I can get away with it, too."

Still smiling, he rode toward the cabin, whistling softly.

VIII.

LATER that day three men rode along the trail which led to the cabin of Jerry Grimshaw. The man in the lead was slender and blond, but now there was a hard, stern expression upon his face which boded ill for some one.

Behind him came an evil-faced, gorilla-like man, whose wrist was tightly bandaged.

The third man, a tall, black-haired individual, frowned sullenly as he glanced down at the tight bit of bandage which was wrapped about his leg just above the top of his right boot.

The Eagle and his two henchmen were bound on important business and none of them was in a very pleasant frame of mind.

"What I don't get," remarked Dan Greer abruptly, as though thinking aloud, "is why yuh wanted tuh go an' be nice an' drink with this blasted whistlin' jasper, chief!"

"That's my business!" The Eagle turned in his saddle to look at the other man, and his eyes were cold and hard. "I don't calculate that you're man enough tuh tell me what tuh do, Dan!"

Greer's eyes glittered, but he shrugged and relapsed into silence. Crawford spurred his horse and moved up beside the leader.

"Who do yuh figure this whistlin' feller is, chief?" he asked.

"I don't know." The Eagle frowned. "But he's dangerous—an' right rapid on th' draw. We got tuh get rid of him quick—no shootin' in th' back, but aside from that I don't care how!"

"Well," Crawford grinned. "We ain't headin' peaceful-like for no sewing circle right now!"

"No." The blond man glanced about him, then lowered his voice. "Quiet! We're gettin' near th' cabin!"

They rode a few paces farther, then dismounted and moved cautiously and silently onward, leaving their horses tethered in a little clump of trees.

When they reached the cabin they found it deserted. As they stood there looking about them warily they heard the sound of some one whistling loudly and musically from the direction of the cañon.

The Eagle turned to his companions and he was smiling grimly.

"He's in th' cañon lookin' for Grimshaw's claim—I'll bet," he said softly. "That's what I call luck! Come on! He won't be so damn musical when we get through with him!"

IX.

IT was very quiet and still in Lost Hope Cañon as the three men moved through the narrow entrance. The whistling had long since ceased. Now the only sound was the faint rustling that the men made as they proceeded slowly and almost silently through the rocky opening.

"Yuh stay here an' keep him from gettin' out, Dan," the Eagle commanded. "If he comes this way don't take any chances—get him, yuh understand?"

"Sure!" Dan Greer nodded. "I got it in for that jasper, anyway!" he grinned evilly. "If he comes foolin' around me with his whistlin' he's gonna die of lead poisonin' injected by a forty-five!"

"Right!" the leader nodded. "Me an' Jack know this place like a book. We'll smoke him out, pronto!" he moved on.

"Yuh bet!" remarked Crawford as he followed the Eagle into the cañon.

The big, gorrillalike man watched them until they were out of sight around a bend, then he smiled and examined the heavy revolver which hung in a holster on his right hip. Satisfied that the weapon was ready for action he replaced it and then sought the shelter of a shaded rock to await the coming of the stranger.

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He had not been there more than a minute when the uneasy feeling that some one was watching him stole over him. He glanced about, but there was no one in sight. Still the sensation of being observed remained.

Greer frowned. His fingers grasped the butt of his gun as he stood up and again looked around. As he did so there was a soft swish and a rope thrown from an overhanging ledge above his head settled swiftly about his throat.

Before he had a chance to realize what had happened it grew tight, and Dan Greer, gasping and sputtering, was dragged clear of the ground.

He reached up and grasped the rope with both hands and by so doing partially relieved the strain upon his neck. He hung there, swaying from side to side and muttering choked, muffled curses.

With one hand he fumbled in the pocket of his chaps for the jackknife which he always carried. Finally he managed to get it out and open the blade with his teeth.

The hard, rocky ground was now nearly twenty feet below him, but as he sawed at the rope Dan Greer resolved to take a desperate chance and drop. With a last wild hack at the rope it parted and the big man fell, his gun leaping from his holster as he did so. He struck the ground with a thud and lay there stunned.

To his unheeding ears there came from above the sound of some one whistling mournfully—a melody which was the song of death!

X.

"LISTEN!" exclaimed the Eagle as he halted and turned toward the entrance of the cañon, which was now some distance away. "Hear it?"

Through the still air there came the shrill, birdlike notes that the two men had learned to know so well.

"Hell, yes!" remarked Crawford. "That feller is whistlin' again!"

"Right!" A puzzled expression passed over the leader's face. "Now what the devil has happened to Dan?"

"I don't know." Crawford shook his head.

"Huh! We better go back an' see!"

Hurriedly they made their way back to the cañon entrance. When they reached it they caught sight of the limp figure of the big man lying upon the rocky floor, the rope still knotted about his throat, although it was but a short piece now."

"Good Gawd!" exclaimed Crawford, staring at Greer. "He's hung him!"

"Looks that way!" said the Eagle, going closer. "No, he must have cut himself down; he's still breathin'!"

"Reach for th' sky, gents!" said a hard, cold voice behind them.

Crawford and the blond man turned to find themselves covered by the two guns in the steady hands of the stranger.

"Well, yuh got us!" said the Eagle softly. "What yuh goin' to do 'bout it?"

"Listen!" answered Solitaire. "Jerry Grimshaw was my friend; he was about th' only real friend I ever had—an' yuh dirty, rotten coyotes killed him for his gold! I swore I'd pay yuh back an', by all that's livin', I'm gonna do it right now!" He looked at the Eagle. "Yuh played square with me in th' saloon last night—yuh coulda shot me in th' back—I gave yuh plenty of chance. Now I'm gonna give yuh two an even break. I'm gonna put my guns back in my holsters an' then count ten. When we gets to ten all three of us is gonna draw, an' may th' best man win!"

"I—I—" Crawford paled and hesitated.

"I never knowed yuh was yellow, Crawford!" said the Eagle softly. "It's a fair deal." He smiled grimly at Solitaire. "Come on! Let's play th' hand!"

Solitaire nodded as he slowly replaced the guns in his holsters. He was watching the faces of the two men in front of him tensely.

He did not hear the big man who lay upon the ground behind him moan softly and then sit up in a dazed fashion.

"One," said Solitaire slowly. "Two—three—four—"

At the start of the count the two men who faced him grew taut and grim-faced.

"Five—six—seven—" went on the puncher.

Behind him Dan Greer had become conscious of the situation. Slowly he edged

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his way over to where his gun had fallen when he dropped. His hand grasped the butt of the revolver and drew it to him.

"Eight—nine—ten!"

As he said the last word Solitaire reached for his guns. The two men in front of him did likewise.

In spite of the almost incredible swiftness that Stevens displayed it was the Eagle's gun which spoke first. It was followed by a blending roar from the whistling waddy's weapons. The Eagle staggered and then dropped to a sitting position, blood trickling from the left side of his shirt.

Jack Crawford shuddered and then fell face downward, a bullet in his brain. Solitaire felt a sharp pain in his right arm and it dangled uselessly by his side.

A groan from behind him made him turn swiftly to see Dan Greer staring at him, glassy-eyed, an expression of startled astonishment upon his face, as he fell.

"Yuh shot him?" demanded Solitaire, turning to the Eagle.

The latter smiled weakly as he nodded.

"Yea! I wasn't gonna let him cold deck yuh by shootin' yuh—in th' back! He got Grimshaw—th' ole man wasn't armed—I don't play th' game that way. Yuh'll find th' claim below that high ledge on th' northeast side of th' cañon—I—" His voice grew weaker. "I—won't—need it—no—more!" Suddenly he laughed. "Yuh sure got guts—yuh whistlin' fool!" Abruptly the Eagle's eyes clouded and he sat there very, very still.

"I done it, Jerry!" said Solitaire softly. "All of them, ole boy!" He stared at the lifeless form of the blond man. "I sorta wish—aw, hell! No wonder they called him th' Eagle—he sure was a brave bird!"

Unconsciously he puckered his mouth into a whistle, but no sound issued from his lips. He shook his head slowly. This was one time in his life when Solitaire Stevens did not feel like whistling. It would have been disrespectful to the dead.

THE END

SPEAKING FRANKLY

SUNDRY of my friends are cruising
Lazily in Southern seas;
Others on the Riviera
Sumptuously take their ease.
Each mail brings a batch of letters,
Long or short and dull or witty,
All expressing for my hardships
Heartfelt pity.

But would I forsake my business
At the season's very height
Just to taste the jasmine sweetness
Of a semitropic night?
Or exchange my snow-clad hills for
Beaches slumberous and sunny?
In a minute—if I only
Had the money!

Edward W. Barnard.

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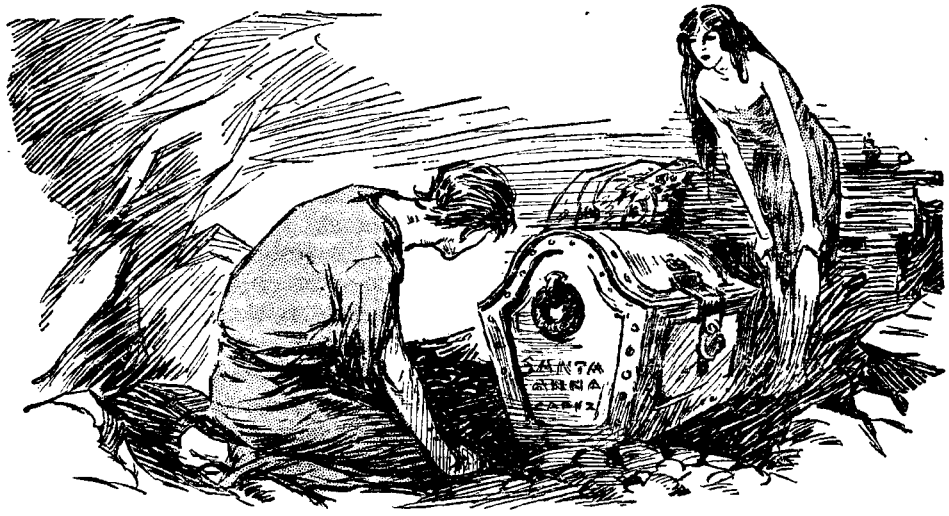

Adventurers All

By BEN CONLON

Author of "Don Juan of San Juan," "The Crawfordville Mystery," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PREVIOUS PARTS

BOB HORTON and Clyde Reade, former midshipmen at the United States Naval Academy, join the expedition of Señor Ramirez, wealthy Spaniard, to retrieve gold from a sunken galleon off a little West Indian isle. Their ship wrecks on the island, but they manage to save enough supplies to establish a camp. They discover traces of some other human being, and Bob is sent out to scout. He finds one inhabitant, Mercedes Tarvil, beautiful young daughter of the late Matthias Tarvil, a sailor who had befriended Señor Ramirez in his youth, when his enemies, the Melhados, had shanghaied him to the island. Mercedes is living in a cave, and just as Bob has persuaded her to come and meet the others of the Ramirez expedition, she makes him wait a few minutes longer so that she can show him something which she says will surprise him.

CHAPTER XX *(Continued).*

NEW WONDERS.

WE retraced our way through the pitch darkness of the tunnel, and when we reached the place where it commenced to widen to form the cavern I found that details were visible that I had not been able to distinguish in the gloom when we were going the other way.

"What's that?" I asked in surprise, pointing to an old chest, very apparently of Spanish workmanship, which stood at one side of the expanding passageway. It was not in the cavern proper, so it was no wonder that I had not observed it before. "Is that what you wanted to show me?" I continued.

"That!" she replied rather scornfully. "Oh, well, you may see that if you want to. Father and I found it washed up in the cave when we came here."

We walked over to it, and she raised the studded lid. The hand-wrought iron hinges of antique design had crumbled long since, and the lid fell back with a clatter. I confess that, in the excitement of the moment, I thought that the chest might be

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brimming with doubloons, pieces of eight, or gold moidores, or golden ingots which had been wrested from the mines of Mexico by lash-driven Indians and melted into forms.

I was disappointed, though; for as Mercedes removed the contents of the old chest I saw that it was filled with clothes of antique Spanish pattern. Here, then, was a mystery. How in the world did this relic of centuries past ever get into this sea-coast cave?

But if my interest had been lukewarm in the contents, so valueless compared to what I had expected, it was quickly aroused again when Mercedes, taking out a gorgeous, gold-incrusted mantilla, tossed it over her lissome shoulders, and then, throwing back her head, stood posed before me.

"Beautiful!" I exclaimed. "Exquisite!"

I was referring to the mantilla, but I could readily see that Mercedes interpreted my remark as referring to herself. Nor was her expression one of vanity; it was more that of a child pleased at deserved words of praise for a good deed.

"Is the chest full of clothes like that?" I asked.

"Yes, many of them. They must have belonged to some Spanish belle, or the young wife of a powerful grandee. They were wrapped very carefully in oiled skins, and father said that is what had preserved them from the sea. He took the oiled skins for our own use. They were much more valuable on our island than fine clothes would be. Some of the things are badly destroyed; others are in surprisingly good condition."

"Then," I suggested, "why don't you dress yourself up in some of them?"

"You would like that?"

"I think it would make you look even more beautiful."

"You go out of the cavern, then," Mercedes bargained, "and I will dress up—to please you."

I felt a distinct thrill at her words, and without any hesitation went out and sat on the sand and looked down into the clear waters. I had had two motives in mind when I urged Mercedes to don some of the clothes from the antique chest.

That she would look ravishing in them I had no doubt. But in addition to this, I thought that it would be well to persuade her to attire herself with more respect to the conventions. A tiny skirt, formed of a length of diaphanous silk which was wound about her sinuous body and scarcely reached her knees, was not, I thought, quite the thing for a young lady of eighteen.

But yet, how could this girl know any better? She had been on the island since a child scarcely in her teens, and she wore her nondescript costume with no air of self-consciousness.

As I sat there thinking, I heard a rustle behind me and looked around and up toward the vision which was standing over me. For a moment I sat there spellbound, lost in the enchantment that she had cast over me.

Mercedes was standing there, in the subdued light which came up from the water of the sea, attired in a way which I am afraid I am not costumer enough to describe. She had undoubtedly taken liberties with the old Spanish raiment which she had found in the chest, but, whatever she had done, the result was startling.

Somehow she had fashioned a bodice and a skirt, both of which clung to her superb figure as though they were caressing her beauty. Perhaps a dressmaker would have found fault with the hang of the garments. One edge of the gown was tilted so that, I noticed with a smile, it showed stockings rolled down below the knees and tucked in so that they would not slip down.

I always had supposed that this particular trick had been originated by some ultra-modern flapper, but this superb creature, who surely could never have heard of a flapper, apparently had devised this wrinkle herself.

Her feet were shod with a pair of small and slender shoes ornamented with flashing silver buckles. In some way she had managed to gather her silky dark hair into a becoming knot on the top of her head, and it was ornamented by a high, begemmed comb.

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The eternal feminine, I thought. Here was the ultimate expression of the instinct for adornment possessed in varying degrees by all women. From here and there in the chest she had taken odds and ends of ancient material and combined them with an unerring instinct for beauty.

"Well," she asked, looking down at me, "what do you think of me now?"

I was silent, because I could only look at her in wonder.

"I can tell," she said, "that you think I look very beautiful."

While she had been speaking I was rising to my feet. I wanted to see her again, from the top of her glimmering hair down to her slender ankles and her tiny feet. There must have been something in my expression that embarrassed her. For the first time she lost that delightful absence of self-consciousness, and was inclined to avert her face from mine.

With the transparency of an embarrassed child who will rush to some new subject to relieve itself of fidgeting, she crossed in front of me.

"Look!" she exclaimed, pointing down the sandy slope and taking my attention from herself.

I followed her gesture down past the submerged ledge.

"What do you mean?" I asked, but even as I peered I thought I saw a great dark shadow in the distant water.

"I told you I would surprise you!" she reminded me. "It is now light enough. You are perhaps a marksman?"

Her question puzzled me, but I could see that she expected me to look down and sight into the distance over her pointed finger.

"Can you not see?" she asked me. "It is lying on its side. There is no figurehead, for that also washed up with the tides, but the prow is pointed in this direction."

I gazed intensely, and the great shadow in the water gradually took more definite shape as I concentrated upon it. There was a vague, dark outline, which to a person of my training could be only one thing, the hull of a vessel. I gathered that perhaps this was the remains of the ill-starred ship in which Tarvil came here.

"It did not break up like ours," I said.

Somehow Mercedes appeared disappointed at my commonplace tone, and I gathered that I must show more enthusiasm over this sight which she had been promising to me as one would promise a piece of candy to a child.

"What was the name of the vessel?" I brought myself to ask. "It was your father's ship, of course?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed. "But I knew that you did not understand! The name of the vessel! What difference could it make? Do you not see? That is the sunken galleon—the galleon that the Melhados had been seeking—the galleon that has cost so many lives and brought the curse of unhappiness down on the heads of so many people!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TREASURE SHIP.

"BUT that is impossible!" I exclaimed, as I gazed at that phantomlike hulk which, as yet, was scarcely visible to me. "That can't be the wreck that Ramirez is seeking. The charts which he took from Melhado when we came from New York on the Coamo indicated that the vessel was sunk at the other end of the island. That's where Ramirez has been confining his searching operations."

"But he hasn't found anything, has he?" Mercedes asked, with a smile. "The reason for that is that the wreck isn't there. Melhado was not taking any chances on having his charts stolen by some one who might locate the galleon before he did.

"Undoubtedly some of the charts were genuine, the course, the position of the island, and all that. But some of them were deliberately falsified—at least, so father concluded—and on them the wreck was represented at the other end of the island instead of this one."

Her argument seemed logical. So that, then, was the reason back of Ramirez's failure, so far, to locate the old hulk containing the treasure.

"And, more than that, if the truth ever comes out, I think you will discover that

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the channel charts were falsified, in order to pile up vessels on those reefs, just as your vessel was. The waters about here are simply studded with reefs. I suppose that's why most vessels sheer away from here.

"You can even see a submerged reef from the top of this cliff over us. It lies a short distance offshore, and apparently the galleon came to its end upon it during a hurricane; probably crashed on the reef, was carried over it by the force of the wind and waves, and slid down into the depression that lies between here and the reef. At least, that was father's version."

The story of the girl sounded entirely plausible, for the dark mass which I could barely discern by looking from the gloomy cave all but merged with the disturbed water about the reef.

"That may not be the wreck that Ramirez is seeking," I objected. "Perhaps it is some other galleon that was sunk here. I have read that the bottom of all these West Indian waters is strewn with the hulls of old Spanish ships," I reminded her.

"I know," she said, "but that ship out there is the old Santa Ana, which sailed from Mexico laden with gold ingots and other treasure."

"But how can you know all this?" I asked.

"Ah! Do you not think my father knew all these things before he started on his quest for the treasure? He spent years in study and investigation of this. Only ill luck caused his defeat.

"In some way when he was on the old Cortez he learned that Ignacio Melhado killed a priest in Panama in order to steal valuable records. In the days of Spanish supremacy on the seas, a tithe of the New World treasure went to the Crown, and another tithe to the Church.

"Consequently, there are some interesting old parchment records in many of the churches of the West Indies and Central America. And where else could the old chest over there have come from? Why, the name of the Santa Ana is on the end of it."

I dragged the heavy chest out into the front of the cavern, and examined it in the greenish light that came up from the clear water. Sure enough, there on the end of it, burned into the oak, the letters shallowed by dust and grime but still legible, was the name:

SANTA ANA
Cadiz

I stood there looking down at the antique box and thinking of the tale that it could tell if only it were articulate. It was a ship's chest, all right, but what were those lovely old garments doing in it? They were the clothes of a young girl—perhaps the daughter of some grandee owner of a fleet of argosies that plied the Spanish Main in the dawn of the New World.

Well, whoever she was, she was sleeping now on the golden sands beneath the azure waters of the sea. I must have been lost in my reverie for some time, for the girl at my side touched me.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

"I was wondering about the clothes in the old chest," I told her. "Wondering what became of the one who wore them so long ago."

"You are something of a dreamer, then?" she said. "I should think that, right now, you would be planning out your share of the gold in the galleon."

"No," I told her, carelessly and truthfully. "Money doesn't interest me particularly. There are many things that I like better."

"I am glad," she said quite soberly. "Never one peso could I touch from the treasure that is lying out there. Never can it be cleansed of the human blood that drenched it, nor can all the seas wash it clean.

"I can never forget what father told me about the old *conquistadores* in Mexico—how they made slaves out of the Indians, and worked them like beasts until they died from fatigue and exhaustion; and perhaps you have seen those outlets at San Juan where they threw Carib prisoners to the sharks.

"Ah! I have cried over the agony of those unfortunates now dead for so long! And there has been so much trouble be-

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cause of the wreck, even since El Diablo first sought it. It brought death to my father."

"Well," I said rather grimly, "El Diablo has set out for very distant ports. And it was the gold out there that helped to bring him, also, to his death."

"And others will die," Mercedes predicted quietly, "before that treasure is ever brought up from the hold of that sunken vessel."

She spoke with the calm assurance of a seeress, and I felt a tiny thrill of apprehension as I heard her.

"But why?" I asked. "There certainly won't be any trouble among the members of our party. They are all sensible, decent people, and they're not going to set about cutting each other's throats like a gang of murderous pirates. I cannot be so pessimistic about this matter."

"Just mark what I tell you," the girl insisted. "I do not know why I am sure of it, but others will die before those ingots ever see the light of the sun."

I smiled tolerantly at her earnestness.

"Well, maybe they will," I conceded, "but I hardly think so. Now that we know right where the wreck is, it won't take long to salvage it. And I know that Ramirez will insist upon your taking your full share of the treasure. Why, if it had not been for you, we never would have found the wreck at all."

"I will not take the money," she said. Then she paused a moment. "Ah, but yes! I will!" she shifted. "Then I will give it to the sisters at Puerta de Tierra. They can give it to the poor and do other good with it."

"That is a worthy thought," I said, "and it would be a most charitable thing to do. But as for me," I continued, "I believe I'll keep my share and try to use it wisely. After all, Mercedes, people in civilized communities need money in order to be happy."

"They are happy, then?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," I said haltingly. "But what I mean is that here you have no use for money, and cannot understand the value of it, or how much it is sought in the outside world."

"Ah, but I know," she protested. "Have not my books told me of the wars and conquests, always for gold, gold."

"Well, anyway," I reminded her, "we haven't got the treasure yet, and we're forgetting about Ramirez and the rest of the party. They probably think I'm dead, that I fell into the clutches of some sea monster, or else was drowned."

I looked at her lithe figure and her adorable face, and smiled. "When they see you," I added, "they certainly will change their minds. But come! I feel a little guilty, worrying them so long."

We made our way, side by side, out of the cave, threading along the narrow passageway and emerging through the widespread roots of the giant Ceiba tree.

Mercedes carefully concealed the entrance to the tunnel, and then we started to circle back toward the pulpitlike rock, where I expected to find my friends. But they must have been discouraged, and have given me up.

"We will return to the camp on the other end of the island," I suggested. "When I started along this trail I never expected to be returning beside a beautiful girl."

We walked down toward the beach and under the leaning coconut palms, but did not stop to secure any coconuts, for I believed that my friends might be but a short distance ahead of us around the turn which skirted the jungle.

They had a longer start than I had anticipated, though, and when we came to the bend they were nowhere in sight. We were near the spring that Ramirez had located, and I suggested that we stop for a moment to quench our thirst.

The sun had finished its morning task of lapping up the heavy dews and was distilling fragrance from the mass of frangipangi and bougainvillea and other shrubs and flowers, and the welling spring was as clear as a mirror.

Mercedes knelt down on the lush grass and, even before she stooped over to drink, she looked at herself in the crystal pool and deftly arranged her hair more to her satisfaction. Then she looked up at me and found me smiling.

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"So girls are all the same wherever you find them," I laughed. "They're always thinking of how they look."

"Is not that all right?" she asked naïvely. "I never thought about it before."

Was she thinking about it now, I wondered, because I had come into her lonely life? Was that primitive and everpresent feminine instinct to attract a mate now manifesting itself in this lovely creature?

"Of course it's all right," I assured her. "It's natural for a girl to want to look pretty."

We rested awhile by the spring, for the difficult task of threading our way through the rank undergrowth had rather wearied me, although Mercedes seemed fresh and cool, and was breathing easily, like a well-trained athlete.

"I'm so used to it," she explained. "I have been in every nook and corner of the island. I know it almost as well as I know the inside of the cave."

"You must have been happy here, in a way, Mercedes," I suggested. I was using her attractive name now every time I could. I liked the sound of it and, with its Spanish suggestion, it seemed so well fitted to this sinuous, laughing-eyed señorita. For señorita she was in type and manner, despite her American father.

"I have been," she admitted, "most of the time. I have even thought that I would like to stay here forever. If only there was some one here to be with me. Why do not you stay, Robert, after the rest of the people all go? I like you very much, and we would be contented together here."

Her suggestion gave me a glimpse of paradise. Why not stay here, indeed? Why go back to the strife and struggle of civilization when here was a veritable Garden of Eden and an adorable Eve?

Here was an abundance of natural riches, all the wealth that a reasonable man could desire. Here on this balmy, tropical island, there was no problem of shelter. The cave, with its marvelous aquatic vista, was as gorgeous as the throne room of a king.

Here was food in abundance to be had for the taking; the golden, succulent fruits of the jungle, the birds and game of the forest, the fishes that swarmed in the crystalline waters of the sea.

Here a man might dream his life away in perfect contentment, passing languorous days and warm, and moonlit nights in a perfect dolce far niente atmosphere. And when it was all over would he be less fortunate than those who toiled in teeming cities to pile up fortunes which they could not use and which did not seem to contribute much to their happiness or contentment?

It was one of those imaginary flights which a person will take, under certain conditions, and then, like as not, never follow in reality. For even as I dreamed on I knew that the blood of civilization was in me, and I knew that I would have to return to the market places of the world.

And Mercedes, if she ever went back to urban life again, would soon readapt herself to it and lose her desire for the sylvan existence which she was finding so sweet.

It might have been different, even, if she had been born on the island, but she, too, had tasted civilization, had known its refinements, and her books, judging from her speech, had also taught her much and suggested the wonder of far places in the outside world.

"Well?" she asked, and I looked up into her smiling eyes.

"I've been thinking," I told her.

"And you are going to stay here with me?" she almost pleaded.

"Maybe, Mercedes," I replied. "I don't know yet."

She looked very much pleased, and clapped her hands like a child.

"If you say that, perhaps you will stay, Robert. I will entice you into staying—yes?"

"It would be easy for you, Mercedes. But, then—oh, I hardly know."

"I know, Robert," she said with calm self-assurance.

"You had better call me Bob," I suggested. "It sounds more friendly than Robert."

"I like it," she agreed, "and that is what I shall call you."

"And now we had better go on our way again," I reminded her. "We still have some distance to go."

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Again we were walking through the colorful, fragrant vegetation. I helped the girl over a fallen tree that was in our path, and after that she frequently demanded my assistance. I suspect, indeed, that she sought out obstacles so that she might ask my help.

But she did this so prettily and ingenuously, and with such a bland expression, that I knew she did not suspect that I was aware of her motive. I thought I would tease her a little, and I spoke to her when she brought me to the foot of a little declivity.

"You know, Mercedes," I said, "I like to help you just as much as you like to be helped."

Her face flushed at once, and she stood there speechless as I chuckled at her. She clenched her tiny fists and stamped imperiously on the ground. Typically childish gestures they were, and they served but to increase my amusement.

"I don't like to have you help me!" she protested. "And I won't even let you help me any more. I don't think I like you now. Anyway, I can get along without you."

"I thought you could," I replied. "But then, Mercedes, you see, I like to help you. You wouldn't be unkind to me, would you?"

I guess she realized that I was trying to tantalize her. Perhaps I was. No one is more prone to teasing, when the opportunity offers, than the person who has been teased repeatedly. And I had been such a person. It was only within the past couple of years that I was as old as my age.

Mercedes had not answered my last question, but had raced up the other side of the declivity like a young antelope, and when I reached the top, breathing rather heavily, she was nowhere in sight.

"Mercedes!" I called. "Please come back to me."

There was no reply, and I thought that, in her indignation, she might have deserted me. If I knew her as I thought I did, however, I realized that she was not very far away.

So I continued to press through the jungle, looking to the left and the right for a glimpse of her as I went along. At last I saw her, peeping at me from a tangle of guava bushes. She was regarding me so reproachfully that I felt ashamed of myself.

"Mercedes," I pleaded. "Come and walk with me again. I'm afraid that I shall lose my way without you."

"I do not care if you do," she said, but there was no verity in her voice.

She remained where she was as I worked my way toward her. I was surprised to see tears glinting in her eyes when I came close to her.

"Please smile at me, Mercedes," I entreated. She made a brave effort to do so, and I realized that this strange creature, despite her eighteen years, her reading, and the instruction given her by her father, was little more than a child in some respects. The greatest school, after all, is contact with people.

I put my arm about her slender waist. It was no attempt at flirtatiousness on my part. She accepted it simply as a mark of affection. We resumed our walk together through the wilderness, and in a few moments she was just as cheerful as ever.

A child soon recovers from the pain and humiliation of its bumps and falls. And that was Mercedes, ardent, impetuous, quick to defend her pride, equally quick to forgive, sincere, as direct as any woman could be.

Not a bad list of qualifications, I thought to myself, as we continued along to the edge of the jungle and looked down the long, sandy beach that wound into another thicket where the crude *bohio* had been thrown up.

"I do not like to go among all those people," Mercedes demurred. "I would rather be just with you. I think I shall go back to the cave again."

"Nonsense!" I scoffed. "You're just shy because it is so long since you have seen any people. They will all be very good to you and if any one isn't he will have to reckon with me. Come!"

We had not gone very far down the beach when Clyde darted out of the thicket, called some word back over his shoulder, and soon several of the party came running after him.

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"These are my friends," I explained to Mercedes. "And that man in front is Clyde Reade, whom we saw swimming out in front of the cave when he thought I had been drowned."

When Clyde reached us he was all but speechless. He looked first at me and then at the beautiful creature who was clinging to my arm. I am sure that this was not to be wondered at.

In the first place, he must have thought me drowned. In the next place, I was accompanied by this strange, beautiful girl, and finally Mercedes's costume was weird in the extreme, and Clyde could not know the circumstances back of the bizarre costume—that this agreeable young lady had dressed up to please me, using aged and priceless garments from an old Spanish chest.

"Where in the world—" Clyde stared. He said no more. I do not believe he was capable of further speech.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.

"HELLO, mister!" I came back, trying to bowl him over by being as lackadaisical as possible. The word "mister" at the Naval Academy is often used by an upper-classman in a speech to a Plebe, and has a deeper significance that it usually has outside, delivered, as it is, with scornful, satirical, or flippant tone.

"Bob!" Clyde gulped. "We all thought you had been killed at the other end of the island—drowned, or a prey to some shark, or—"

He stood there and heaved a deep sigh. Clyde Reade must have been born with poise, too. I had never seen him so flustered before.

"It's a long story, Clyde," I cut in as he stammered for words with which to express his astonishment. "But first, this is Señorita Mercedes Tarvil. A friend of mine," I added, still determined to be flippant, "that I've had down to the Farewell Hop. We've just been strolling in Lovers' Lane," I finished up.

The Academy terms had their significance for Clyde, of course, but Mercedes turned and looked at me with wonder in her eyes.

Clyde's eyes took on a twinkle in place of their look of astonishment. Clyde Reade, you may be sure, never dropped his poise for very long.

"You must be one of the June Plebes," he came back snappily, "not to be aware that the gentleman is always first presented to the lady."

"This is Midshipman Reade, Mercedes," I said to the girl at my side, still posing for Clyde's benefit. "Midshipman Clyde Reade, *late* of the United States Navy."

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a serious little nod of her head, but, in her shyness, remained silent. I was sorry for her when the others arrived, as they did noisily about now, for she seemed painfully embarrassed.

"Bob!" exclaimed Ramirez. "Bob!" He ran up to me, grasped my hand, all but put his arm around me, with his Latin volubility and ardor. There was a chorus of "Bobs," and even Jack Allison rushed up to shake my hand. I had never felt quite so important in my life.

"Where in the world have you been?" asked the señor. "And who is this girl you have brought back with you?"

When I introduced her as Mercedes Tarvil, with a meaning emphasis on the surname, he looked at the girl keenly. At first she recoiled under his stare.

But one word was generally enough for the señor. At once he seemed to sense the situation, although he listened to me while I briefly explained my adventure and recounted the essentials of the story that Mercedes had told me back in the cave. I withheld the part about the sunken galleon, however. I thought it might be wiser to leave this for the private ear of Ramirez.

The señor's ardent and sympathetic manner quite won the girl. She was silent, a little shy. She looked up furtively at Avis, who, I noticed, was looking her over boldly and admiringly. Jack was outspoken in his admiration for the new member of the party, and I could see that the temper of Avis was rising.

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"I want to talk to Señor Ramirez alone for awhile," I announced to my friends when I had completed my brief recital, "and then he, as leader of the party, can use his own judgment in communicating my story to you. Mercedes," I said, turning to the silent girl beside me, "I'm going to turn you over to Avis here who, I know, will be good company for you."

"Thanks," said Avis sarcastically, "but I don't think I care to be the nursemaid to a savage. Come on, Jack," she added, "let's go back to the *bohio!*"

With that she turned abruptly and started to walk up the beach. But Jack, however, did not follow her. He was smooth about his intentions, as he usually was. "Awfully glad to see you back with us, old top," he said, stretching out his hand again and offering me another mechanical smile. Of course, I knew that Mercedes was the magnet, and not myself.

I was not surprised when he turned to her, and spoke in his smoothest manner. "I'm sorry," he apologized, "that my wife acted the way she did, but she has not been feeling at all well lately. I know that she will regret her quick words and come and tell you."

"Perhaps I will not care for the friendship of your wife," was the simple statement of Mercedes.

"How can she refer to you as she did, the beautiful, ladylike way you talk!" Jack exclaimed. "Wonderful! Isn't she, Bob? But perhaps"—turning back to Mercedes—"I might make amends for her discourtesy. If there is anything—anything at all, that I can do—"

His suggestion, made in his most grandiloquent manner, might have been an excerpt from one of his talks to some affected Greenwich Village flapper on whom he had his usual designs.

"Why should you do anything?" Mercedes questioned. "You are not responsible for the actions of your disagreeable wife," she continued in her direct way. "She did not like the way you were staring at me—is it not so? Myself, I did not like it."

All of us laughed at her frank words—that is, all but Jack. He reddened perceptibly at the rebuff he had received in the presence of the rest of us. He had been accustomed to the admiration of the shallow and frivolous girls with whom he had been associated in the past and had come to believe that, as a lady's man, he was just about invincible.

"It won't work, Allison," I told him. I could no longer bring myself to call him Jack as I had in the past. There was no longer much pretense of friendship between us.

His friendly gesture a few moments previous had been the first since we were in San Juan together. "Miss Tarvil," I continued, "apparently doesn't care for your wife or for you, either.

"She is a very genuine sort of person, well educated through many books and a careful father's care up to very young womanhood, but unused to social quirks and accustomed to speaking what she feels.

"So it will be best," I added pleasantly, but with a threatening undertone in my voice, "if both of you keep away from her. She will not, I am certain, thrust her company upon you."

"But I was only trying—" Jack started. But I interrupted him abruptly.

"That's all right," I asserted. "I know about what you were trying, because I've seen you try it before. That 'll be enough for now. I would suggest that you go back to the *bohio* and give your wife the pleasure of your company."

Glancing about he saw that the other members of the party thought much the same as I did, and without another word he turned on his heels and walked away.

"I am very much afraid that our gallant young courtier is going to make trouble before we are through here," said Ramirez. "He has taken some of the edge off of a most delightful reunion.

"I do not have to tell you of my happiness in finding you safe, my boy; and, young lady," he said, bowing like an old-time grandee to Mercedes, "need I say that you are most welcome among us?

"Indeed, it is we who are the interlopers on the island, for you have been here long before us. And were you not as beautiful and as good as you are, even, we should

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still be privileged to know the daughter of Matthias Tarvil.

"Ah!" he added, smiling. "You speak the English very well, but tell an old man that his perception is not fading when he remarks that, although I recall my friend Tarvil as American, you have the Spanish blood?"

The warm eyes of Mercedes kindled, and the señor realized that he had been correct. He shot a stream of liquid Spanish at her, and Mercedes answered in the same language.

I was jubilant over the friendship formed so readily between this strange pair. "It might be as well to keep Mercedes here with us," I suggested. "She knows everything that I am going to tell you and perhaps she might be able to add some information. You don't mind leaving us alone a few minutes, Clyde?" I said to my old Academy friend.

"Not at all. Take your time, old man. I'll take a turn along the beach," Clyde agreed graciously.

"Señor Ramirez," I began as soon as he and I and Mercedes were left alone, "I have what you will regard as good news, as excellent news. It may surprise you that you have been looking at the wrong end of the island for the sunken Santa Ana."

"I have never mentioned the name of the Santa Ana in your presence," said Ramirez, "nor have I ever shown you my charts, friend and confidant though you are. You know that the galleon was named the Santa Ana, then?"

Then, swiftly, but with a due regard for details, I told him proudly about the cave at the west end of the island and how, from the undersea mouth of it, one could get a vague view of the ancient caravel. I told him, as Mercedes had told me, of the deception practiced on their charts by the Melhados.

"It is like them," he said bitterly, "to put profit above men's lives!" To say that he was amazed at the information I gave him is not to do justice to his attitude. His nostrils were dilating in excitement.

"Ah! I wondered!" he exclaimed. "I wondered why there was no wreck near the point indicated on the Melhado map! I was beginning to believe that El Diablo had cheated me even in death. Now everything is clear.

"It is good to have the news come to me from one of whom I am so fond. They were clever men, those Melhados! If it had not been for you, Mercedes," he said, addressing the girl with a paternal kindness, "we would have gone away from here empty-handed, for I have never despaired of our getting away from the island.

"We have some of the ship's boats, I am seaman enough to be a judge of good sea weather, and we could get into the ship's lanes without great difficulty or danger.

"But now, before we leave here, you will have gold enough to possess all the pretty things which a girl as sweet as yourself ought to have. Why," he laughed, "you will even have enough money to buy yourself a young and handsome husband."

"Thanks, Señor Ramirez," Mercedes acknowledged, "but I don't want to buy myself a husband. And as for beautiful things to wear, I do not care for them at all."

"Ah!" Ramirez insisted. "But the time will come when you will want lovely things to match your own loveliness. And as for buying a husband," he continued, "I said that, my dear, only in jest. Why, if I were younger, as young as Bob here, for instance, I would lay everything I possessed or ever hoped to possess, at those tiny feet of yours. But I am old, and my days of romance long have gone by. *Dios!* The quick passing of the years!"

Mercedes smiled and blushed at his compliment, and the storm which I had seen gathering in her eyes passed over quickly, and the sunshine appeared in them again.

"You are very kind, señor," she said simply.

"I am truthful, señorita. Nor would, I am sure, any riches poured at your feet be enough to spoil you. There are such women. I knew one—once."

He seemed to forget himself in dreaminess for just an instant, then returned to his brusque, skipper manner. "Well, Bob," he said, "you have done a very good day's work—you and your charming

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companion. Perhaps we had better go down to the *bohio* and tell the others what we know. There is nothing to keep concealed from them, although I am glad you displayed your usual discretion in laying the facts before me first."

Even as he was talking the sun vanished beneath the horizon and the tropical night closed swiftly down upon us.

"Come, Mercedes," I said, taking her hand and raising her lightly from the sand on which she had been sitting. "We will go down to the *bohio*."

"But, Bob, I would rather not," Mercedes decided. "To-night I am going back to the cave and sleep and, maybe, dream. I would be much happier there."

"Is it that you are afraid that some disagreeable person might wound your feelings?" asked Señor Ramirez. "Because we, Bob and myself, will see that no one does. You shall be made very welcome and very comfortable."

"It is not that," the girl replied. "But I feel strangely uncomfortable among so many people. I want to be alone—at least, now," she pleaded.

"But, Mercedes," I objected, "you can't go back to the other end of the island to-night! Already it is dark, and you might lose your way."

Her silvery laughter rang out upon the still night, and even Ramirez smiled at my concern.

"But, Bob," Mercedes argued, "have I not been alone here for so long, and day and night have I not roamed the island? I know all about it, and can find my way around as well in the darkness as I can in the light."

"I am aware that you must know it," I said dryly. "You took me over every fallen tree and up the side of every little gully on it to-day."

Señor Ramirez stood silently by, watching the two of us, a humorous twinkle in his eyes.

"I believe I shall say good night," he said. "If I know anything about Señorita Mercedes, she is a girl who has her own way, and I don't believe that she will come to the *bohio*.

"Well, my young friend," he said to me, "it is wiser to permit her to have her own happiness. *Buenos noches*, Mercedes." He took one of her hands and bent over it and lightly touched his lips to it. "We shall meet again to-morrow—yes? And you I shall see later to-night, eh, Bob?"

He turned and started down the beach, and we watched him walking erectly along the white sand. I would have given everything at that moment if I possessed his ease of expression, his unaffected gallantry, his poise and perfect self-possession.

Mercedes and I stood there silently together for a few moments after he had gone. A crescent moon was in the star-studded sky, and it lacquered the placid sea with its rays. We heard the vague murmuring of the gentle waves as they rolled up on the white beach some distance away from where we were standing.

There was such sheer beauty all about us that it seemed to leave us speechless for awhile. Mercedes slipped an arm through mine, and she was so close to me that my blood went racing tempestuously through my veins.

"Are you tired, Mercedes?" I asked her gently.

"No," she replied. "I am just happy, wonderfully happy. I never felt this way before. I like to be with you."

"You are no happier than I am," I said.

"And you will come with me to-night to the cavern so that I shall not be lonesome?" she asked.

"No," I told her. "I cannot do that—it would not be right."

"Right? Am I one, then, to harm you, Bob?"

"Of course not. You came here to the island before conventions had a chance to form themselves in your mind," I told her. "To go with you to the cavern would be a wrong thing for me to do, Mercedes."

"You do not like me—that is why you will not come?"

"But it is because I do like you that I will not go with you," I insisted.

I am sure that Mercedes did not understand me at all. Suddenly she let go of my arm and regarded me with blazing eyes.

"I hate you!" exclaimed this beautiful, semiprimitive creature. She turned and

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raced down the beach, and vanished into the jungle which sloped down to meet the upper strand.

"Mercedes!" I called after her. "Mercedes!"

But there was no answer, and, despite the fact that I lingered there for a half hour, she did not reappear.

I then started reluctantly for the *bohio*, realizing that very probably I would not see Mercedes again that night. In the morning I could make up with this willful child.

My companions were all up, talking together in the light of a slush lamp which had been salvaged from the ship and swung, without gimbals, at the door of the hut.

Allison gave me rather a nasty look as I joined the gathering, but Avis, to my surprise, greeted me cheerfully.

"I'm sorry, Bob," she apologized, "at what happened back there, but I really wasn't feeling well. Your new conquest is decidedly beautiful, even if she is an ignorant little castaway, and she ought to relieve the tediousness of your stay on this God-forsaken island." The claws of Avis were so visible that her remark served only to amuse me. I laughed openly.

"Mercedes Tarvil is beautiful," I agreed, "and she is quite a refreshing contrast to some girls I have known."

That was all I said, but I had the satisfaction of seeing the glint of anger that came into the changeable eyes of Avis. I then turned my attention to the others in the party, ignoring the spiteful girl completely.

"I have told our friends all about your experience to-day," Señor Ramirez said to me, "and we are going to move to the other end of the island to-morrow and start operations. How deep under the water would you judge the wreck is lying, Bob?"

I gave the señor several bits of information which I had not had an opportunity of telling him previously.

"But what have we got to work from?" asked Rogers, the diver upon whom, to a great extent, depended the success of the expedition. His companion, Halpin, who was temporarily *hors de combat*, would not be in condition to go under water for some little time. "A diver on such an operation can't very well work from a small boat," he protested. "Don't you think it will be necessary, señor, to set Clyde to constructing some sort of heavy float?"

"But why can't you work from the inside of the cavern?" I suggested. "I don't know much about diving problems, but I should think it would be made to order—that all you would have to do is to walk from there right down into the point where the wreck lies."

"Yes, that could be done," Rogers agreed, "and it might be the best and most efficient way. How far is the wreck lying from the undersea opening into the cave?"

I replied that in my opinion it was about a hundred yards.

"A hundred yard dash in a diving suit is quite an undertaking," said Rogers, smiling. "Much would depend upon the nature of the currents in that section. But we'll look the place over in the morning; that'll tell us more about it. The old expedition begins to look pretty hopeful now, doesn't it?"

"This stuff is all right," Jack Allison spoke up, "but what I want to know is how we're going to get off of this damned island."

"That part will take care of itself," was the señor's opinion. "I think my plans in the direction will work out all right, when I am ready."

"Well, I'll tell you one thing," asserted Jack, with a burst of courage such as he had not displayed previously, "I'm not going to stay here much longer. You shanghaied my wife and myself," he accused Ramirez. "You brought us here. It wasn't any choice of ours.

"Now it's up to you wise guys to take us back where you found us. And when you get us there, there's going to be trouble. The more I think over this thing, the bigger outrage it appears to be."

There was an ominous silence. Very probably he believed that Avis's presence would be his protection. "Our ship was wrecked," he started again, "and here we are on an island that no vessel ever comes near, and—"

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He was interrupted by a call from the distance.

"Bob!" came the call. "Oh, Bob!"

I jumped to my feet and ran in the direction of the sound, for I knew the voice was that of Mercedes. She was streaking toward the *bohio*, her hair streaming behind her, and she appeared rather exhausted, as though she had been running for some distance.

"Bob!" she panted. "Bob! I came to tell you—I hurried fast—that a ship has dropped its anchor in the waters off the west end of the island. I could hear the rattle of the anchor chains."

CHAPTER XXIII.

INTERLOPERS.

HERE, indeed, was most astounding news.

I hastened toward the *bohio*, Mercedes following on my heels, and conveyed the startling information to Ramirez and the others.

"A ship!" Ramirez exclaimed. "And at anchor?"

Mercedes nodded. "I started up on the rock," she said, "to take a plunge before going into the cave, and I heard the rattling of the anchor chains; then, as the moon rose higher, I could see the dim outline of the spars."

"How big a ship is it?" Ramirez asked.

"It has three masts. It is larger than the ship you came on. The voices of the men on the ship came to me over the water. I ran all the way here to tell you the news."

"Sit down and rest yourself, my girl," Ramirez ordered. "Bob, we should have stationed lookouts at the other end of the island, although I thought that it would be hardly necessary since we planned to move to that end to-morrow. The headland between this point and the sea masks our view from here, especially of a ship reaching here on an eastward course.

"Now, I wonder if that is a vessel that just happened to drop its hook off here on an emergency call for water or provisions, or it may have been disabled in some way. And yet, a strange skipper without charts would have gone on the rocks. I wonder!"

He began to pace nervously back and forth. "I wonder if that ship belongs to Melhado's brother, and if he has come here on the same errand that brought us."

"Well, whoever it is," interrupted Jack Allison, "it's the ship that will get Avis and myself away from this island. Avis!" he said joyously. "Now for civilization. Come on, dear. Let's go down to the west end of the beach and look it over. Gee! I hope this dame hasn't been seeing and hearing things!"

"You will stay right where you are now," ordered Ramirez quietly, "until we find out what vessel this is and who is on it. Are you just a plain fool, planning to be seen by a vessel that may, and very likely does, carry here a man who is as cruel and conscienceless as a tiger shark, and who will have enough men to back up his desires?

"If it is a large vessel, as Mercedes says, it is plain that the crew will greatly outnumber us, and I think we will have to resort to strategy if it comes to a conflict between us."

"But I thought," I said, "that you had the only chart on which the location of the island was mapped, señor?"

"I thought so myself," Ramirez replied, "but then I might have been wrong. As I told you before, I took the documents from the cabin of—well, you know where I got them, Bob," he added, not wishing to repeat certain facts before Jack Allison. "But undoubtedly his brother, who remained in the islands while Melhado was raising money to finance the expedition, had a copy of the chart. You may be sure that Melhado, with his devilish ingenuity, would be certain to take care of his own interests."

"Whoever it is," Allison cut in again, "I tell you I'm not going to take a chance on being marooned here for life. That ship might slip away again before morning, and if you folks choose to stay here, that's your business.

"But you haven't got any right to make us stay here with you—and you're not going to. You've done enough already,"

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he accused Ramirez, "to make yourself liable to a long stretch in prison. Come on, Avis, let's be getting along."

But Allison did not get along, and neither did Avis, who, it seemed to me, was not particularly keen on going.

For Ramirez, angered by the unexpected insolence of the fellow, shot out a hand of steel and, catching Allison by the throat, shook him as a terrier would shake a rat. Jack struggled in vain to release himself, but his efforts were unavailing against the Spaniard, who had the strength of a giant.

I feared, for a moment, that Ramirez might kill Allison, but, when the face of the latter was commencing to purple, the señor gave his victim a final thrust that sent him reeling to the ground, where he lay in a semiconscious state.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, bowing to Avis, "but the time has come to decide who is the head of this little expedition. Pick him up and throw him into his bunk, boys, and I believe that when he recovers he will know better than to continue his insolence. One fool among us could menace this whole expedition, our lives even."

Avis had watched the scene with dilated eyes, but she had not tried to go to the aid of Allison; neither did she, for that matter, even raise her voice in protest. But now she turned furiously on Ramirez.

"You vile brute!" she exclaimed. "You have no business to act in such a high-handed manner. He may be a fool, yes, but, after all, he is my husband, and some day you may pay for this attitude."

"But, my dear girl," argued Ramirez, quietly and courteously, "we cannot have mutiny in our ranks. The success or failure of this project depends, for the moment, upon our finding out who these people are who have come to the island, so that we may regulate our actions accordingly.

"If you and your husband attracted the attention of the vessel, we might be put in a highly undesirable position. I would suggest that you give your husband a little good advice when he awakens. He will get into greater difficulties, I must warn you, if he continues to oppose my will."

"Why," I asked Ramirez, "wouldn't it be possible for all of us to take refuge in the cave where Mercedes has been living? We would then be right close to the strange vessel, and we could watch it without being watched ourselves."

"A very good suggestion," Ramirez agreed. "But is the cavern large enough to accommodate all of us?"

I assured him that it was plenty large enough, and that we would be more than secure in it.

"That's the move to make, then," he decided. "All right, boys. We shall start for the cave at once," he ordered crisply.

Hasty preparations were made for the trip, and within a half hour we were on our way.

Mercedes and I were at the head of the procession. The island girl led the way along the coast in order to avoid the difficulty of the shorter jungle route by night. She was not very communicative, and I realized that she still was a little angry with me because she supposed me not inclined to spend all of my time with her.

I, too, remained silent, and we made our way rapidly along the edge of the sea. The night was calm and beautiful, and the night breezes wafted subtle and seductive scents from the tropical vegetation that clothed the island.

Ramirez and Clyde brought up the rear of the procession, and Allison and Avis were directly in front of them. Jack had been roused into recovery, and was in a sullen mood. I knew that Ramirez was keeping his eye on the young fellow for fear that the latter would make a bolt and try to reach within hailing distance of the ship.

And I believe that this is just what Allison would have done if he had not been keenly aware that the vigilance of Ramirez was never relaxed for a moment during the trip to the west end of the island. The divers, Tom Loring, the O'Neills, and the two blacks preceded Allison, and I believed that Ramirez had placed them in that position for a purpose.

There did not seem to be any conversation between Avis and Jack. Relations be-

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tween them, I thought, were somewhat strained. They were already beginning to tire of each other, I thought, this pair, both selfish, self-centered, luxury-loving.

Back in civilization they would have had their theaters and their dinner parties and various little excitements which might have brought them together temperamentally. Here on this island they had none of these artificial helps to relieve their boredom.

I had noticed several little spats between them since we had been on the island. They were not hypocritical, in this sense, I had to admit.

It took us some time to reach the giant Ceiba tree that stood at the land entrance to the cavern, and I threw off the heavy woven brush cover that Mercedes had made for the purpose of concealing the entrance to the shallow shaft.

The members of the party, with the exception of Ramirez, Mercedes, and myself, made the descent. Clyde was the last to enter, and before he did Ramirez instructed him to keep a close watch on Allison and to make certain that the latter had no opportunity to make his escape. I believe that Jack, if he had found it possible, would have deserted the party and left Avis behind him.

After we once more had concealed the entrance to the cavern, the three of us warily made our way toward the top of Pulpit Rock. If there was a ship in the offing, it was not at all improbable that some of the crew might have landed, so we advanced with the greatest caution.

We ran into no one, however, and when we had reached the pinnacle of the headland, we saw the vessel which Mercedes had brought us news of lying in the basin below us.

It was a short distance offshore. Its sails were furled, and the bare spars and yards were outlined in the light from the crescent moon.

There was no sound of life about the ship, and although we scouted about for more than half an hour, no ship's bell was struck. It appeared to be deserted, and floating there, it seemed to me, like some ghost ship.

"They might suspect that there is some one on the island," was the opinion of Ramirez. "Well, we shall show no lights, and at dawn we can watch their movements from the cave. So this is the point from which you dive into the sea-entrance to the cavern, is it, Mercedes? You must be quite a swimmer."

"It is a treat to see her dive," I said. "By the way, why not have Mercedes dive down in order to show you how practicable it is to enter from the sea? Or perhaps I had better do it."

"No," Mercedes insisted. "It is night, and you are not so familiar with the entrance. I will do it."

Ramirez finally consented. "But wait," he suggested, "until Bob and I have had time to join the others in the cave through the land entrance. I want to impress upon our party the strategic position we are in with such a cavern. Wait five minutes, Mercedes, then make your dive."

The señor and I went down along the rocks, entered the shaft, and found our party already moderately well settled. Several ship's candles had been lighted. Clyde, with his usual sailorman's neatness, was putting things shipshape here and there. Jack Allison, as yet hardly recovered from his shaking at the hands of Ramirez, was stretched out on an old piece of matting at one side of the cave.

"My friends," Ramirez announced, "this is the only place in the island at which we shall make use of lights until we find out what this ship is and what her business is here, and who is aboard of her. I suspect that it may be commanded by a man whom I knew years ago, and who, in a way, I shall be glad to meet again," he added, looking at me meaningly. "This cave is in the nature of a fort, only much more valuable because, so far as I know, any one on that ship out there could not suspect its presence at all.

"If the men out on that ship," he continued, "are legitimate treasure-seekers, I suppose they have as much right here as we have. We have located the treasure, though, and this is a business proposition. Findings, it is my contention, should be keepings.

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"Even if the men from this ship should be friendly, I must pledge every one here to secrecy about the location of the galleon. If I had known of this surprising development, perhaps I should not have confided in all of you the news brought to me by Bob and Mercedes. However, I have confidence in—in all of you," he continued. "All of us are in this thing together. It is a business proposition. We must protect our trade secrets.

"Now, there is another possibility to the visit of this ship. I have some reason to believe that its commander may be a man named Melhado. If this proves to be so, there will be a fight. Make no mistake about that.

"The crew of that vessel will outnumber us, but we may be able to capture the landing parties as they are sent ashore. You men look to your arms, see that they are well oiled and in condition for speedy use, if necessary."

At this point there was a noise at the sea entrance to the cave, and Mercedes, her trailing Spanish gown knotted neatly up to her shapely knees, made a dripping appearance. The effect of the appearance of this beautiful young lady from the sea was astonishing upon the various members of the party.

Ramirez strolled about the cavern, enthusiastic about its possibilities as a hiding place, yet I could see from his lustrous eyes, unusual in a man of his age, and his sensitive nostrils, that he was in a high state of excitement.

The señor, Clyde, Loring, the O'Neills, Rogers, Halpin, and myself held a little conference as to our plans for the next morning if the ship sent a party ashore, which we believed extremely likely.

The señor put forth the information that it would be most valuable if we could know whether or not Melhado was on the strange vessel. "If we could only capture one or two of the men from a landing party, we could gain much desirable information," he said, "and yet their non-appearance would prove to the others that somebody was on the island here before them, thereby putting them on guard."

We talked for the better part of an hour, and I finally convinced the señor of the advisability of letting me swim out to the ship and make some sort of reconnaissance.

CHAPTER XXIV.

OUT TO THE MYSTERY SHIP.

THE night was velvety, sensuous, balmy; stars gradually sprinkled themselves about the tropic sky. The mystery ship, a good sized three-master, was anchored off the western end of the island, her dark masts becoming more clearly outlined as the moon rose to wash it in soft tones of silver and black.

"One thing seems reasonably certain," was the opinion of Señor Ramirez, as he and I held a final discussion beneath the tall coconut trees which lined the beach not far from Pulpit Rock. "Some one on that hooker must have known what the skippers of other vessels didn't know—what I myself didn't know."

"What is that, sir?" I asked.

The señor replied that the guiding spirit on this newly arrived vessel apparently had charts or other information by which to avoid the death channel on the other side of the island.

There was evidently a negotiable and thoroughly navigable channel on the west side, he pointed out, and the vessel's skipper, beyond any doubt, was planning to send out a shore party next morning. Small boats could even negotiate the waters writhing about the submerged reef on the western side, and could make the western sandy beach with ease and security.

"You are sure that you want to try that swim?" he asked, his tone a trifle dubious.

"Oh, I am sure of it," I answered eagerly. I was afraid that this unusual man, who often had the driving severity of a bucko mate and often the loquaciousness of a companion of years standing, would reconsider and forbid my adventure, for always, somehow, he had the attitude of a father.

"What you have suggested," he said, "would prove a very effective plan. I

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would have no hesitation if I knew you would return safely. You are the best swimmer, among our white men anyhow. Naal and Nickander might even outswim you, Bob, but they have not your discretion. You are doing this thing for our expedition, of course, and not for glory?" he asked, smiling at me tolerantly.

"Why, of course. Do you think I am looking for glory, señor?"

"I hope not," he replied. "It is a perishable thing, my boy. But there are two very pretty girls on this island, Bob. You seem to be quite a Lothario, after all."

Well, I would not say that he was not partially correct. Perhaps I had wanted to impress Mercedes with my courage and ability, and, for that matter, Avis was one who would make much of such a stunt as I planned.

"Now, do not feel humiliated at what I have said," the señor advised, dropping into his soft, paternal manner. "Have you ever seen a man killed or mutilated by a shark?"

"No," I answered. "I have been swimming since early boyhood, but as you know, it was in the waters of a temperate climate largely."

"I have. It is not a pleasant sight," said the señor, "especially when the swimmer is one of whom you are fond. As for some men—well, I am sure that I would be on the side of the shark."

I knew that he was thinking of the Melhados. It had been a poor day for the Melhados, I thought, when they had antagonized this man who could be the most loyal of friends but who made a fetish of vengeance.

"Now," he continued, "you and Naal hit it off rather well together, is not that so? He seems very fond of you."

It was true. Naal, the Curacao black, had seemed to take to me from the first day that we put Morro Castle astern, and the little adventures we had experienced together seemed to have intensified his regard.

One day I had been with him on the west beach and helped him cut off a massive green turtle's escape to the sea. Subsequently most of our party had been drafted to capsize the monster, as large and heavy as the average piano, and Prosper's culinary genius had furnished us with another luxury as the meat would keep.

"You are not thinking of sending Naal out to the ship, are you?" I asked.

"Not alone. He came to me a little while ago, and insisted that you are 'too good man for shark-meat.' He says that he has battled sharks with knives many times, and wishes to accompany you in your swim. These island blacks are born swimmers, and they know how to fight off sharks.

"Moreover, in spite of what happened to poor Rodriguez, they seem safer from a shark, somehow, than a white man. Better let Naal swim alongside of you. If you are molested by a shark, he will be able to take care of the monster with his knife."

"That might be a very good idea," I admitted.

"Fine!" said the señor. "Now I will feel better about your stunt."

He placed his fingers in his mouth and gave a low whistle. Naal came trotting down from the lee of Pulpit Rock—where he had been waiting to be summoned, I now realized.

Ramirez spoke to him gutturally. Naal answered in joyous tones, then drew his sheath-knife and vigorously pantomimed what he would do to any shark which challenged our progress out to the three-master. He reminded me of nothing so much as a faithful dog, allowed to accompany his master on some gladsome foray, but denied the gift of speech.

His black, muscular body gleamed as we started out from the sandspit that stretched out into the sea on the western tip of the island, the nearest point to the anchored vessel. He wore only a breech-clout which extended up to form a sort of sash or belt, in which two razor-sharp knives were thrust. I wore only a loose pair of trousers of white drill, part of my working uniform on the Monauwi.

We swam quietly toward the vessel with its beckoning riding-lights, and must have covered roughly about one-third of the distance, when there was a flash in the water at my right.

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Naal, who had been swimming to the left of me, darted under me with the deftness of a seal, and as he came up there was a glint of his knife in the moonlight. I could not see the blood, but I could hear the rip of the blade and caught a terrifying glimpse of the monster's white belly as it turned in the water.

Naal was chattering words which I could not understand, but I gathered that he was telling me to swim away from the sea-wolf, nor did I need the warning, for a few quick overhand strokes carried me several feet away from the conflict.

Once more, in the moderate light shed by the crescent moon, I saw Naal's knife come up in a ripping motion, and we were safe from this menace of the deep. I learned afterward that this was far more of a one-sided battle than it had seemed. But out there in deep water, at night, I assure you that this experience thrilled me as no previous one ever had thrilled.

We swam along easily now. I was glad of the limited moonlight. We could approach very close to the vessel, and, if we were discreet, had an excellent chance of not being discovered. As we drew nearer, I estimated that the mystery ship must have been well upward of a couple of hundred tons, surely not a large vessel, but probably carrying a larger crew than the Monauwi.

To my intense joy I discovered, a few minutes later, a small dinghy attached to the vessel, with a painter running up to an eye-bolt on the taffrail. Boats were also swung aboard on the starboard side, as if the crew had been stationed at the davits to lower boats in case of emergency, proving that the skipper of this vessel knew the menace of the waters that bathed the island and was making every preparation in case of disaster.

I swam close to Naal, put my finger to my lips—the international gesture for silence—and continued astern of the vessel. I pantomimed to Naal that he was not to try to board the ship, but to stand by in the water out of the dim circle of light shed by the stern lamp. He nodded and grinned.

Always decidedly athletic, it was no great task for me to reach up for a high hold on the ship's rudder, pull myself to the rudder-horn, and from there to the pendant; then, grasping hold of the painter which led up from the trailing dinghy, I leaned over and, by stretching my body and neck, could peer into one of the lighted ports.

There was no one in the little cabin, but at a table, in an adjoining cabin, was a black-bearded man who sat at a table on which was a bottle of whisky, and, although I could not see the other end of the table, I realized that the bearded drinker had some tête-à-tête, for his head was bobbing emphatically, and he was gesticulating with his hands.

This man, I thought, might have been the skipper, perhaps even Melhado himself. A few vague sounds floated back from the forecastle. If there were any men on deck, at least on the after deck, they must have been sleeping, was my opinion, for no sounds could be heard aft.

I was about to try to climb aboard in this quarter, when there was the sound of steps on the companionway, and I slipped back into the water, only my head above, while I held tightly to the rudder with my hands.

Several men had been summoned aft, for what reason I could not figure. If I could once get aboard unseen, though, I knew enough about ships to secrete myself somewhere, and, with good luck, carry out the purpose of my clandestine visit. While these men were aft, I might be able to swim to the bow of the vessel and get aboard by means of the bobstays.

It was worth trying. I did so, and was pretty well winded when I reached the bowsprit and clambered aboard the vessel. The men were coming forward again, rather noisily. There was a snatch of maudlin song and some raucous laughter. Evidently there was grog in the forecastle too.

I managed to secrete myself back of a winch, and pulled a coil of heavy rope close to my back to hide me if any of the seamen passed to the rear of me. The precaution was quite unnecessary. The seamen clattered down the forward companionway, and I could hear the drone of their talk below,

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and once in awhile coarse laughter and guffaws.

I slipped aft gradually, my bare feet making no more sound than a cat. A couple of men were spread out, sleeping, on the port side abaft the beam, and I padded by them very softly. Except for the snoring of one of them, all was as silent as a ghost ship.

It seemed to me that my little reconnaissance could be made without challenge of any sort, and as I reached the after-deck, brought myself up suddenly as, through the gloom, I could see the broad back of a big man, garbed in singlet and dungarees, who was bent over the port taffrail, gazing contemplatively into the sea.

Perhaps Naal, down there in the water, had seen him in time to slip over to starboard of the vessel, for the giant figure lounged there, sending out clouds from a reeking pipe. Very probably he had just come from below for a final smoke. I hid myself hastily back of a hatch coaming, and wondered just how to proceed now.

A fist fight—that in itself would have been nothing. This man was of a powerful build, but so was I. But he might be armed, and a shout from him would rouse the entire vessel.

I crouched there and wondered. If I only could have the luck to spirit away one member of the crew, I would be able to get a full line on the purpose of this ship's visit to the island. This, however, would be no easy task. Indeed, as I continued to crouch low, it seemed almost impossible—that is, impossible for me.

A few feet from me was a row of belaying pins set in a fife-rail. I could have drawn one of them out, and, cat-footing over to the rear of this unsuspicious seaman, could have laid him out easily, then probably have gagged him and slipped him down to Naal.

And yet I could not bring myself to this. It would not take very much force behind a belaying pin to crack a man's skull. No, I couldn't go through with that, no matter what happened or did not happen. A gentleman's training is sometimes a handicap for a man who would succeed in material things.

I knew that I had to act quicky. Once let the seaman turn around and he might see me if he circled about from the port side; then there would be some excitement which might not be healthy for me. This big man might not be so squeamish about belaying pins as I was.

I circled about the coaming, crouched very low, and stalked him quietly. He was entirely unsuspicious, spat over the rail, and put his pipe back in his mouth again and a blast from it assailed my nostrils.

I took one more cat-footed step; then, bracing my bare feet against the deck, I quickly wrapped a wrist about each ankle, and, lifting with all my strength, catapulted him over the rail and into the sea. I had lifted with jerky, jujutsu fashion. The Japanese art had been taught us at Annapolis.

The surprised seaman let out a grunt that was more of astoundment than of fear. His hand had gone instinctively to his pipe, and before he could recover from his surprise I grabbed hold of the rail and filliped myself overboard, closing with my victim just as he was about to let out a shout. The shout ended in a low gurgle as I grabbed the seaman by the throat and doused him under water.

As big as this man was, I could see that he was not much at home in the water. The sailor's inefficiency in swimming has always been a matter of great mystery to me. But just at present I was not taking time for any philosophizing about it.

I continued to clutch at my prisoner's windpipe, and eased the both of us farther away from the vessel, all the time feeling sorry for this surprised man who had never done anything against me, who had come to grief through his good night pipe and a probable poetic urge to watch the beauty of the tropic night.

There was the slightest of sounds beside me, and I turned and looked into Naal's grinning face. He worked quickly with his hands and his sheath knife cut a strip of the combination sash and breech clout, then grimly and efficiently—and with surprising quickness—proceeded to gag the seaman while I held him up and pinioned his arms.

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Now the danger of rousing the ship was minimized, but we swam about for some time, and at times had considerable difficulty in keeping our gagged friend afloat. I transferred this responsibility entirely to Naal, and swam back to the ship, for I was realizing that the dinghy would be necessary. This captive of ours was not taking his humiliation without putting up a struggle spasmodically, and very likely we would never be able to get him ashore without a boat.

I climbed back on the vessel, untied the painter of the dinghy, and shoved the little boat before me as I swam toward Naal. Oars were stowed snugly in the bottom of it, but rowlocks often make considerable noise, which was the reason why Naal and I had not used a boat to get to the vessel in the first place.

When I reached Naal, he and I lifted the gagged man into the dinghy. The rest of the Curacao negro's clout was slashed up, and the seaman was bound, and we stretched him out in the bottom of the boat.

I propelled it shoreward by swimming back of it until we were a discreet distance from the vessel, then I climbed in, we unshipped the oars, but we did not row. We kept the oars out of the rowlocks and paddled our way slowly and quietly along. It was laborious work, and we were perspiring copiously when we reached the sandspit.

As the prow of the boat cut into the sand, Ramirez came out of the shadows and extended his hand.

"You have genius—or luck," he said, smilingly as he saw the form of the bound man.

"Call it luck," I answered. "And I guess it would have been a different kind of luck if Naal hadn't been with me."

I told him about the attack of the shark. The old señor smiled at the exciting story, since it was a story with a happy ending, but his paternal interest in me came to the fore again.

"The period of your swim was a nervous one for me, my boy," he said. "But you have done perfectly, Bob. You think that Melhado is on the hooker?"

"This man can tell us," I replied. "We had very good fortune." I explained our luck in spiriting the man away without rousing the vessel. "And now," I finished up, "if Melhado is aboard, he'll think that one of his men slipped overboard—some of them must have been drinking heavily—for the dinghy will not be missing.

"I will take it back to the ship, and tie it up as I found it. If Melhado is aboard, he will not suspect that there is anybody on the island. I wonder if we can make this prisoner talk."

"He will talk, all right, do not worry about that," said the señor, a little of his submerged cruelty showing in his smile. "But do you not return to the schooner, Bob.

"Naal has proved his intelligence and discretion, and perhaps he could swim back, after he ties up the boat, with less nutrition for the sharks. Naal will take the boat back. I would not like again to go through the anxiety that I felt when you were out there in the water."

We lifted the man from the boat, cut the strips that bound his feet and, with drawn revolver, Ramirez commanded him to walk just ahead of him as directed. He guided the prisoner up over the rocks.

The land entrance to the cave had been opened, and a few moments later, Ramirez, Naal, the prisoner, and myself were sitting in the cavern, lighted by a pair of flickering ship's candles.

Ramirez spoke in Dutch to Naal, evidently commanding him to return the small boat to the schooner and to swim back, for the Curacao black nodded and smiled and disappeared.

"Now," said the señor to me, "remove this man's gag, Bob."

I did so. The prisoner stood there sullenly for a second. "Might I awsk what is the meanin' o' this contemptible outrage?" he asked, then. His accent was decidedly British. He was dark-skinned, not black, although the features were decidedly negroid I now could see in the light of the candles.

"You are a Jamaican?" Señor Ramirez asked.

"I am—if that is any of your business."

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"What is the name of that vessel out there, and who is your skipper?"

The prisoner hesitated a moment. "I will not tell you that," he replied with a show of challenge and courage.

"No?" The voice of Ramirez was oily, menacing. "Have you ever been tortured?"

He stood there, his hand gripping the revolver, his face half smiling. The giant seaman's face took on a look of fear.

"Bob," said the señor, his revolver still pointed at the heart of the seaman, "hand me one of those candles. Or you had better light a new one. The light is none too good here. I do not suppose you would care to see a man forced to speak by a lighted candle, would you, Bob?" he asked. "You Anglo-Saxons!" He laughed.

"One ties down the victim," he continued, "and directs the flame of the candle again the prisoner's shoe. The leather becomes hot. Even when the prisoner decides to talk, it still takes some time to remove the hot shoe."

The perspiration was trickling down the face of the big, dark-skinned man who stood there, his arms tied. "It is as much as my life is worth to tell you what you ask," he said, obviously weakening.

"It is as much as your life is worth not to tell also," said Ramirez. "Out there on the ship, you might be able to make a fight of it, to die quickly. Here you would die—but slowly. I will give you ten seconds, my friend."

The helpless man shrugged his shoulders. "I take it I have no choice," he said in his odd British drawl.

"None," Ramirez agreed coolly. "The information you give me will be checked up. If you are found to be lying—" He gave a shrug of his shoulders. "Well, I would rather not say what will follow. Is there a man on that ship out there who is called Melhado?"

"Yes."

The señor's sensitive nostrils dilated nervously. "Ah!" he said.

"Your ship sailed from where?"

"From Port of Spain."

"You knew the purpose of the voyage?"

The Jamaican replied that he did. He answered dozens of questions asked by Señor Ramirez, told of the duplicate charts aboard his vessel, the news that Melhado's brother had been getting his ship manned and outfitted at Port of Spain, Trinidad, for some time. It was in Port of Spain that Armando Melhado had heard of his brother's death. He had been delayed in his expedition, the prisoner understood, by a voyage to San Juan.

"You know who I am?" Ramirez asked.

"I have an idea," replied the seaman. "Are you Señor Ramon Ramirez?"

"I am. You have heard this Melhado refer to me, perhaps?"

"Yes, but I think that Melhado believes you dead. You sailed from San Juan in a small vessel. Melhado has many eyes. But he believed that your vessel might have become grounded on some of the reefs on the other side of the island—Melhado's charts were drawn to that purpose, in case they ever got into the wrong hands."

For several minutes Ramirez continued his cross-questioning of the seaman, Lionel Sparks by name. It was plain that Sparks, while fearful of the ire of Melhado, was none the less fearful of this dominating old man before him. He could not hope to return to the ship now, he said. There was a hint that he might be persuaded to go over to Ramirez.

"I am not in the business of making traitors," Ramirez told him. "And yet, as you mentioned awhile ago, you had no choice in this matter. This man Melhado is an arch enemy of mine. Possibly you have not experienced any of his treachery, as yet. You would. It is simply a matter of time with a Melhado. I cannot conceive of your having formed any attachment for him. You joined this expedition for personal profit, of course?"

Sparks admitted this. "*Bueno*," said Ramirez. "I shall see that you receive as much in this camp as if you had remained with Melhado. You will be under close guard until all of your stories are checked up, until we can learn to trust you. Once you have proved yourself, you will be accepted as one of us. Let there be the slightest act of treachery on your part, and you will die very painfully."

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Later that night, with Loring, Juan O'Neill, and Nickander told off to guard Sparks closely so that he could not possibly escape or give any warning to the ship, the señor and I waited down near the sands-pit for the return of Naal. We remained there until an hour before dawn.

"Well, we must snatch a few winks," said the señor finally. "I have an idea that we may have an active and exciting day before us."

"You do not think a shark might have got Naal?" I questioned as we walked back toward the cave.

"I do not think so," replied the señor, "and yet, who can tell what might happen out there? I think I know men, black and white, and that Naal should have in any way proved traitorous is out of the question. In any case, he is missing—a dark outlook for us.

"This development steals a great deal of advantage from your capture of Sparks. If Naal has been taken, Melhado would spare no torture to wring the full story of our party out of him."

We loitered a few moments beneath the coconut trees before going into the land entrance of the cave. But Naal did not appear.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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THE TUNE OF THE TELEGRAPH POLES

THERE'S a tune that the train plays on telegraph poles,
Like the touch of a hand on a harp;
Hidden songs to be heard by those listening souls
With an ear that is ready and sharp.

Oh, full many the tunes that I've hearkened and heard,
As I sit in the hastening train—
Strange airs with a meaning oft clear and oft blurred
By the rushing, now hushing, refrain.

For whenever I'm leaving the town I hold dear,
And the folks that are gentle and kind,
When the window pane's dimmed with a glistening tear
At the landmarks I'm leaving behind,

Then the tunes start to play on the telegraph poles,
As slow as a soft whispered wish,
And their low, saddish melody mournfully rolls
In a swish—and a swish—and a swish.

But when I come home and my heart's beating high
With a longing for those I would see,
Why, the telegraph poles just go galloping by
In a skip and a rush and a whee!

And when dear old landmarks come looming to view,
And my heartbeats begin to be quick,
Then the tune of the telegraph poles takes the cue
In a clickety-clickety-click!

Beatrice Ashton Vandegrift.

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Fare Enough

By GORDON STILES

MICHAEL O'BYRNE eased his gaudy colored taxicab out of the huge garage of the Sunrise Taxicab Corporation in Tenth Avenue and turned eastward to join his fellows, plying up and down the great traffic arteries of Manhattan. But, somehow, this August morning, he did it without the enthusiasm which as a rule marked the beginning of Mike's day.

Mike knew the reason for this; it was the blasting heat. For three days New York had sizzled in the worst torrid wave of the season and there still lingered in Mike's system, traces of the touch of gas he had received in the late "War for Democracy."

Under most conditions he was able to carry on well enough. But sustained heat got him.

If anybody had hinted, however, that Michael O'Byrne was not the happiest man in the city, he would soon have discovered his mistake. And for further evidence, one of an inquiring turn of mind might be referred to Mike's domestic establishment.

This consisted of a three-room apartment in West Twenty-Second Street between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, quite handy to the Sunrise plant and in a section where one need not pay out all his income for rent alone. This small domain was presided over by the sweetest and neatest and best girl who had ever sat behind the cashier's desk of a Manhattan laundry or, for that matter, behind any desk in any part of the world. You could prove that by Mike, any day in the year!

There was, too, Michael O'Byrne, Jr., aged three, who, his father had secretly determined would grow up to be nothing less than an alderman but for whom, Doreen O'Byrne was planning a more genteel career—doctor or lawyer or something else professional.

Mike often sat in his flat, young Mike on his knee, with Doreen bustling about over the three-burner gas stove, and thought how lucky he was. Born on the East Side, of poor but prolific parents, Mike had struggled through the lean years of boyhood, peddling papers, shining shoes—anything to help out the family exchequer—and finally, at the age of sixteen, had obtained his first regular job—assistant to the car washer in a garage.

From that he progressed to the post of

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general helper and so on until, at the outbreak of the war, he was drawing the generous salary of twenty-one dollars a week.

But, returning from France, there was no job to be found at anything a week and because Mike presently found himself hungry and homeless, he took up with whatever offered at the moment. He swept speak-easy floors, shoveled snow in the winter, worked as general roustabout on a smelly fishing excursion boat which made daily trips from the Battery and engaged in a dozen other menial occupations of a most temporary nature.

Therefore, when through a chance acquaintance, he secured an opportunity to go on regular duty at the Sunrise establishment, he seized it with a tremendous eagerness although the pay was only seventeen fifty a week. He worked himself thinner even than he was at the time and hoped the opening would lead to better things.

It did. One year, to the day, after Mike had taken up his duties with the Sunrise Corporation, he drove out into the street, a full-fledged licensed taxi driver and he felt that the whole world was before him.

From then on, matters advanced most satisfactorily. The twenty-five per cent which was Mike's rake-off from his takings, together with the tips, constituted an income that the new driver sometimes had dreamed about but had never hoped to possess. Nevertheless, he managed to spend all of it. That is, he did until he met Doreen.

It was in the course of a dispute over the ruination of Mike's best shirt that he came into contact with the girl. And once he had got an unhurried look into her dark blue eyes, it was all over!

He instantly withdrew his complaint against the laundry, yet discovered an astonishing number of other subjects to discuss with the pretty cashier.

It required only three Sunday outings—one each to Long Beach, Coney Island and Bronx Park—to convince Mike that here was the one girl who could ever mean anything in his life, also one without whom life itself would be impossible!

He told her that and Doreen told him a number of equally ridiculous things. And because neither had anybody to say them yea or nay, they lost no time and were married at once. When young Mike was born, eighteen months later, Mike O'Byrne took his place on top of the world and sat there with increasing security.

They were very happy, the O'Byrnes. The one bit of unpleasantness had been due to the efforts of Mike's immediate boss, one Rohmer, to start a flirtation with Doreen. Of course, he got nowhere but it was annoying and naturally enough brought on a coolness between the two men.

II.

Turning into Broadway, this stifling morning, Mike picked up a fare, an elderly woman who desired to be taken to a Wall Street banking house. He nosed his car into the slow-crawling stream of vehicles which daily choke the central thoroughfares from Columbus Circle to Bowling Green.

Idly watching the traffic lights, Mike manipulated the cab automatically, shooting forward with the rest of the tangle about him, when the police whistle sounded; stopping with a screeching of brakes when the lights showed red. Driving under such conditions had become instinctive.

It was the heat that bothered him to-day—the devastating glare of a red sun, the lifeless air, the horrible odor of carbon-monoxide gas, pouring from thousands of exhaust pipes! It never had bothered Mike so much before and he felt a wild desire to "step on it"—to drive at the highest possible speed, away, out somewhere into clear air, where there were shade trees and perhaps a stir of wind.

It seemed as if he *must* do it! This thing was unbearable! Mike swayed giddily in his seat, clutched the wheel fiercely for support.

He recovered himself for the moment, swore under his breath and tried to focus his attention on the guidance of his machine. But as he neared the junction of Thirty-Fourth Street, the dizziness came over him again.

His head swam and a dark wave of something passed before his eyes. The shrill note of the traffic officer's whistle meant

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nothing; Mike was struggling with himself.

There was a sudden squeal from the passenger, a couple of masculine shouts, a clanking impact! The mist cleared sufficiently for Mike to realize that he had run past the signal and that his front fender had crashed into the side of a huge limousine.

Just what happened then remained somewhat confused in the mind of the luckless Mike. A policeman's hand had grasped his collar and he had found himself staggering as he tried to steady himself on his feet with that everlasting heat clutching at him and that awful blast of sound dinning in his ears.

He saw dimly the passing of a card from the pompous owner of the limousine to the policeman, noted the profound and respectful salute on the part of the officer. He heard, from a great distance, the rasping voice of the old lady saying: "Yes, officer. I did notice him wabbling around all the way down."

Twenty minutes later, Michael O'Byrne was booked in the station house on charges of driving past a traffic signal and operating a motor vehicle while intoxicated! Vainly he protested that he was ill.

"That's what they all say," grated the desk sergeant's voice. "Lock him up!"

And when this had been done, the sergeant examined once more the card of the man whose car had been struck:

J. Watson Millard
Millard & Sons, Bankers
New York. U. S. A.

"That bird will get his," remarked the sergeant, referring to Mike. "Old Millard would raise hell with any judge who let him off easy. Was the guy drunk?"

"Sure he was drunk," returned the arresting officer and turned to go.

III.

It was a dazed Mike who sat in the O'Byrne flat late the following afternoon, listening to the comforting words Doreen was murmuring into his ear, trying to believe her when she declared that everything would turn out all right. To Mike, it seemed as if the whole universe had been swept from beneath his feet.

First, there had been Rohmer's curt refusal to furnish bail. He had told the police: "Let him stay there. We don't want anything to do with drunken drivers. He's fired. We'll have to stand damages, too. That's enough without bothering with bums!"

The miserable hours in a cell, the nightmare of the court. The fine which would take practically all the family savings and, worst of all—the revocation of Mike's operator's license, and the confiscation of his taxi permit!

"Please, please don't look so unhappy," Doreen urged. Her arms were about his neck and she kissed him between words.

"All right, I won't," Mike returned. "I'll dig up some kind of a job to-morrow. I don't know where, but I'll find one."

"That's the boy!" Doreen told him. She began preparations for their supper.

Finding a new place, however, did not turn out to be an easy matter. Of course, driving a cab was out of the question and whenever Mike got on a trail that seemed promising, the conversation with his potential employer ran something like this:

"Where have you been working?"

"Sunrise Taxicab Corporation."

"What did you quit for?"

"Well, you see—"

It was hopeless. Mike might explain until he was out of breath. The ghastly court record would rise up to damn him.

And at home, Doreen struggled to stretch their few remaining dollars over the uncertain void until there should be another pay envelope. The light of hopeful inquiry which he saw in her eyes when he returned at night tore at his heart and his throat grew so tight that he could hardly find the voice to explain that he had found no work.

He stared at Doreen, cheerfully endeavoring to convert scraps into something that looked like a meal; at young Mike, rolling about the floor and trying to arouse in his father the enthusiasm for play that he himself felt.

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Poor kid, thought Mike, he ain't wise. I'm damn glad he ain't! Then he would make half-hearted efforts to romp with the baby and somehow the hours would drag away to bedtime, to be followed by other hours, hours of black sleeplessness when Mike twisted and turned and racked his brain for a solution only to rise, completely exhausted and resume the weary tramp of the baking streets.

The days and weeks passed. The money gave out and Mike was forced to pawn such articles as would bring the means of buying food and milk for little Mike. Then the time came when there was nothing more to pawn and Mike took to borrowing small sums from former associates among the Sunrise drivers.

He begged Rohmer for a job at anything but the latter only sneered at him.

On the street evenings Mike would gaze enviously at the gayly lighted cabs, swarming over the town, and his heart ached with the injustice of it all. He hated the police; he hated old J. Watson Millard; he hated that stupid old woman who had helped take away his living and that of his wife and child!

IV.

MEANEY it was who planted the idea in Mike's brain. Jerry Meaney, who had been his sidekick at the Sunrise place. Now Jerry was taking a job as chauffeur to an important person on Long Island, leaving Sunrise flat.

"Hell, take a chance!" Jerry urged. "You was t'run out on your ear for nothin' at all, wasn't you? Ain't you got a right to live, same's the next feller?"

"I'll get nabbed, sure as the devil," Mike declared. "Just my damn luck! An' if you give me that ticket an' they get me, you'll be in a mess yourself!"

"The hell I will. It won't happen, anyhow. But if it did, all's I'd say was that I lost it. They wouldn't have nothin' on me. Don't you fret about that. Now, look here. I'll slip you the dope an' you can get busy first thing in the mornin'."

Thus it came about that, next day, Michael O'Byrne again sat at the wheel of a taxicab, plying for fares in Manhattan streets. But whenever he sighted a Sunrise vehicle, he carefully turned his head lest he be recognized by a driver who had known him.

The reason being that in Mike's pocket reposed an operator's license in the name of Jeremiah Meaney and the permit stuck up in the cab bore the same designation. Over the photographs of Jerry, those of Mike had been neatly pasted.

The cab was a rented one, secured at Jerry's suggestion, from one of the companies who thrive by the method.

Once the decision had been made, Mike felt better. He had been deprived of his livelihood through no fault of his own. They could go to hell! No court should force him to let his wife and baby starve!

He had told Doreen frankly what he was about to do and while the plan worried her, she did not attempt to dissuade him.

"I know, dear," she said, "that they have no business to keep you from working. But it would be terrible if they arrested you again. You will be careful, won't you, Mike? Oh, I don't know! I don't know! It seems only fair that you should have a chance to earn a living! Well—you'll take care, won't you?"

He kissed her and promised that he would.

And when he went home at midnight, the seven dollars that represented his profit above rent and gasoline costs, was to Mike sufficient justification for his venture. Doreen cried a little over the money, but her tears dried when she looked at little Mike, sleeping in his crib.

V.

A MEASURE of contentment crept back into Mike's heart. The constant fear of detection dwindled before the satisfaction of clinking coins, of seeing a full larder at home with young Mike growing pink and plump on good food and rich milk. No. Mike was not sorry.

He had two or three narrow escapes. Occasionally his route took him past the fatal corner where he had been arrested. But he managed to edge well away from the point where the officer stood, as a rule.

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However, one day, his car chanced to be first in line, and he sat there under the nose of his enemy, as it were, praying that the other would not look at him. It was just as the traffic started forward that the policeman did look his way, and Mike saw a puzzled expression come into the man's eyes, as if the latter were trying to place him.

But before he could do so, Mike was well away, and the traffic guardian too occupied for further investigation. The incident sent disagreeable shivers up Mike's spine.

It was, then, no cause for wonder, that in the back of Mike's mind lurked the feeling that one day the dreaded climax would come. He tried to keep himself braced against that eventuality and doggedly worked to increase his takings so that Doreen would have something with which to carry on.

But when the climax did come, it came in a manner of which Mike had never dreamed. And came with a suddenness that stunned him!

Cruising along Third Avenue one afternoon, alert for a fare, Mike spied, out of the tail of his eye, a man lounging before a jeweler's shop window.

His right hand was in his coat pocket, and he appeared to be dividing his attention between the interior of the shop and the street. At the curb, perhaps twenty feet to the north, stood a motor car with its driver bent low over the wheel.

"I wonder," thought Mike, "if this ain't a holdup or something."

The question was answered in a startling manner. Out of the shop two men dashed, a screaming proprietor at their heels. The pair sprang for the waiting car and the man who had loitered raced after them! But not before he had swung around and fired point-blank at the luckless jeweler.

The latter fell in a heap, and the trio gained the car. It started with a jerk and sped up the avenue!

The street was in an uproar, and, seemingly out of nowhere, a patrolman appeared and sprang on the running board of Mike's cab. With his drawn pistol he motioned toward the fleeing car.

"Get 'em!" he ordered. "Don't lose sight of 'em!"

His blood tingling with the excitement of the chase, Mike stepped on it! The elevated pillars flew by like pickets in a fence; trucks and smaller cars danced about him! But, with eyes glued on the bandits' machine, Mike drove as he had never driven before—as he never had thought it possible he could drive!

Deftly swinging in and out of the maze, missing cars and pedestrians by inches, he plunged on! In his heart he felt that it could be only a question of minutes before he would hit something that would finish them.

Then, of a sudden, the car ahead appeared to be backing up. No! he was overtaking it, bearing down on it!

The reason, he discovered, was that a ten ton truck had halted squarely in the path of the robbers and, as the frantic driver endeavored to swing into the side street, Mike saw the glancing collision that resulted.

The car swerved sharply, skidded into a hydrant and crashed against a flight of brownstone steps! As Mike's cab drew up and he jammed on the brakes, the four desperadoes, apparently unhurt, scrambled out. Two of them ran for it, followed by the policeman's bullets.

Then, as the other two stood fast, with drawn guns, a shot from the officer's pistol laid one of them out on the sidewalk. At the same instant the fourth man, a burly, cool-eyed person, fired and the bluecoat dropped his gun as his arm went limp.

There was murder in the bandit's eyes as he again leveled his weapon, but before he could discharge it, a heavy wrench, propelled with all the strength of Mike's arm, struck him full on the jaw. As he staggered from the shock, the young Irishman rushed him!

Surprised and dazed, the big fellow went down! Like a flash Mike leaped upon him, smashing, kicking—inflicting damage in every possible manner. All rules went by the board. Mike's fighting blood was up.

When the officer, attended by half a hundred bystanders—brave, now the shooting was over—rushed to the spot, it was

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with difficulty that Mike was pulled away from the form of his antagonist.

It was after other officers appeared with the two men who had fled and the pair who had tarried to shoot it out had been secured, that Mike realized what the business meant for him.

He'd better get out while the getting was good, he decided, and forthwith, slunk quietly into his seat. He *must* get out, that was all!

As he let in the clutch, however, the patrolman who had ridden with him turned quickly:

"Hey! Where d'ye think you're goin'?"

"Thought I'd go back on my job," Mike managed, with pounding heart.

"Job, hell! You're my chief witness. You folly the patrol to the station, young feller. I'll ride with ya, t'be sure. See?"

At the stationhouse, Mike waited on a hard bench for more than an hour. He pondered his predicament over and over in his mind; hoped against hope that they would just ask him a few simple questions and let him go. He started when the door of the room into which the prisoners had been taken opened, and braced himself for the worst.

The dragging minutes wore themselves away and at last, a massive jawed man, obviously a detective, came out, glanced about the place and walked up to where Mike waited.

"You the taxi guy who was in this mix up?" he demanded.

Mike answered: "I'm him."

"Well, the inspector wants you. Come on." He led the way to the closed door.

The arresting officer, arm in an emergency bandage, stood by the inspector's desk. He smiled encouragingly at Mike, and the inspector spoke.

"Officer Walsh here tells me you did some plain and fancy wrench throwing," he began.

Mike stood there, feeling and looking dumb.

The inspector went on: "What's your name?"

Mike almost choked. "Jeremiah Meaney," he got out.

"Where do you live?"

Mike flushed and stammered. If he gave his proper address, they might check him up. If he didn't, he was lost, anyway. Suddenly he made up his mind.

"Look here, inspector," he said. "I'm a wrong guy myself."

"What's that?" boomed the other.

The detective and the patrolman stirred interestedly. The plainclothes man sidled between Mike and the door.

Mike swallowed and went on. "My name ain't Meaney, inspector; it's Mike O'Byrne!" He paused.

"Well, what you done?" The inspector's voice was stern.

Mike floundered into his story. Finished with: "Honest to God, inspector, I wasn't drunk that day. I hadn't had a drink in a year An' I got a wife an' kid that's got to be fed. They never gave me a chance. It was the sun that got me. I got a sniff of gas in the war an' the hot weather don't do it no good. So you see I had to do somethin'."

The inspector was grinning.

"Cripes!" he exclaimed, "I thought from the way you acted you'd pulled at least a coupla ax murders! All you pulled is the shift lever of a taxicab. An' Officer Walsh says you're pretty good at that.

"The bird you walloped this afternoon happened to be a guy they want about everywhere outside of Zion City. Hellcat Stuver, they call him, and he's a wicked one. The commish will probably pin an iron cross on you for helpin' round him up.

"So you don't need to worry about that taxi license, my boy. I'll see that it's fixed up all proper for you to-morrow. Tend to it myself so's there won't be any delay. Now you give me your right name and address; you'll have to show up when they bring this guy for trial."

"Say, inspector!" There was a somewhat wild note in Mike's voice. "You through with me? Gosh! I want to get home an' tell my wife!"

"Go to it." The inspector dug a five-dollar bill out of his pocket. "Here, you get her some flowers with my compliments —an' some good toy for the kid."

THE END

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Range Rivals

By JOHN H. HAMLIN

CHAPTER XV.

THE KITTEN'S CLAWS.

TIGE'S soaring hopes crashed to earth again. Dorrie Gruman's babbling entry couldn't have been timed at a worse moment for him. Her gush about that " fearless and splendid hero " stuff had put a crimp in his progress with Nora.

Dorrie'd sprung in like a cat, frightening off the wild bird which he had nearly tamed. And he felt helpless as a rat which this same cat had pounced upon—unable to get away, powerless to explain matters.

Nora's kiss, the thrilling sensation of her arms creeping around his neck—just a hint of what she could really be to a man if once she surrendered. And Dorrie had sent her off in another huff. Of course, Nora had good grounds to believe now that he had been soft-soaping Dorrie, had ceased fighting, and was figuring on *marrying* the Buckjump!

Tige had never felt more cheaply ridiculous. What did Loop, Dummy, and Scow think of him? They had dodged out of the room, and he had stood like a dumb sheep, letting them go without a word in his own defense.

But how could he explain Dorrie's silly words to them, to Nora? His boys hadn't kidded him about Dorrie, not even after her showing up at the barn dance. That meant they suspected he was playing up to the girl, and for a purpose.

And Nora had been so darned sweet, had looked so pretty, and had been such a dandy little sport—coming over to help him out with the cooking. Why, he'd never been so rip-roaringly happy and hopeful in his life. He had seen himself bowling over every obstacle blocking his trail to success with the Buckjump, the bigger success of winning Nora. With Nora by his side, cheering him on, why, what couldn't a man accomplish?

This story began in the Argosy-Allstory Weekly for December 31

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"Sufferin' catamounts!" he groaned aloud.

"What's that, Tige?" Dorrie, her two hands resting on the table, swayed toward him. "You act so strange sometimes. I don't understand you, Tige."

"I'll say you don't!" He could have shaken the girl till her teeth rattled. If she were only Spot Stevens for about five minutes, what a relief to wade in and smash the daylights out of him! And he had felt sorry for her only a couple of days before—she'd never had a beau, was a starved little kitten craving love.

Well, wasn't that what he was starved for? He wanted Nora more than anything else in the world. Could it be possible that Dorrie had the same hankering for him?

Tige's knees weakened, and he slipped into the chair, his head drooping into his palms, brown fingers clutched in his thick hair. Here was something he couldn't fight with his fists, pull a gun on, nor even lasso it with a rope and drag it out of his trail. He cringed when a hand touched his bowed head, caressed his clutching fingers.

"Tige, what is it, dear?" Her voice had changed. It wasn't the whining mew of a kitten. There was a deeper, more vibrant note in it.

Tige lifted his head, straightened his shoulders, and sat erect. Dorrie's hand fell to his shoulder, clung to it. The pale blue eyes were on a level with the gray ones, the tiger stripes gleaming strangely.

Dorrie's fingers loosened and she sat in the chair so recently occupied by Nora.

"Tige, you're not glad to see me?" The rouged lips quavered, tears reddened the lids of the pale eyes. "I thought y-you would be."

What was his next move? The girl was crying in hiccuppy sobs. The gay bandanna had slipped over one eye. She looked anything but lovable, and yet Tige's heart softened with pity. Were they both in the same boat—he loved Nora and couldn't get her; Dorrie loved him— But did she love him? Admiring him as a fearless and splendid buckaroo didn't mean that she was in love with him.

He had to say something—couldn't sit there stupid as a bump on a log.

"Miss Dorrie, you *don't* understand, and it's mighty hard tellin' you why I acted up like I wasn't glad to see you." Lord, how was he ever going to flounder through any kind of an explanation? He felt like a fool, but there was only one way to straighten out this mess and it was up to him to go at it right now.

"Oh"—she brushed the tears from her lashes, shifting the bandanna slaunchwise over the other eye—"you just *acted* that way, Tige? You really are glad, down in your heart?"

A fearful effort to be honest, but he shook his head. "You see, Miss Dorrie, folks get me wrong about you. They think I'm wantin' to—to—er—well, it's a darned lie, but they claim I'm wantin' to marry you so's I can get hold of the Buckjump."

"Oh, I believe you, Tige!" Dorrie rose from her chair, leaning across the table, the pale blue eyes transfigured by a new and shining light. "It's for myself you like me, Tige, not because mamma owns the Buckjump!"

Tige groaned. He was getting in deeper and deeper. She *was* a dumb Dora, all right! He'd try a new whirl. It came to him in a flash, same as one of his strong hunches.

"*Like* you—why, yes, Miss Dorrie; only I ain't in your class. I'm just a cowpuncher tryin' to make good on leasin' the Buckjump from your mother. I ain't such a big boob as folks say I am. I'm more like your mother's hired help, and I don't want to hop over the line fence separatin' us, Miss Dorrie."

Tige gasped for air. He'd never tackled such a beastly job in his life. He couldn't talk much plainer to the girl without refusing a proposal before the question was popped.

"I wish you didn't feel that way, Tige."

Good Lord, she was off again! He could not shake the kitten gently; up to him to tear off the clinging claws roughly.

"There's another girl I'm powerful interested in, Miss Dorrie. Always have been crazy about her, and it's awful hard to explain to her I ain't rushin' you, 'count of what folks are saying." He was forced to use this last defensive argument.

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"Oh!" Dorrie's softening tones hardened. The kitten was no longer purring. The shining light changed, and the pale blue eyes turned to something resembling glazed china. "You mean that Willis girl?"

Tige kept his mouth shut. He wouldn't drag Nora's name into this belittling affair, even though she had persisted in taunting him about Dorrie Gruman.

"That's who it is. I've heard you were in love with Nora Willis, but I wouldn't believe it. She's crazy about that horrid, swearing Spot Stevens." Dorrie unsheathed her claws and scratched. "I've seen her at the picture shows with him and riding horseback with him lots of times. She's a common little flirt, Tige."

Tige shoved his chair back and got to his feet. If Nora had gone back to Spot Stevens again, nobody to blame but Dorrie, who was butting in like this. What was the use of chewing the rag with girls—they believed exactly what they wanted to believe.

"You know, don't you, Tige, mother would have sold to Mr. Broxton if I hadn't begged her to give you the lease?" Dorrie adjusted the bandanna, pulling it rakishly over her right ear; and that, with the jealous glare in her rolling eyes, gave her somewhat the appearance of a female pirate.

"I reckon everybody'd been better off if you hadn't horned in on that deal," said Tige, his resentment finally cropping to the surface.

"Why did you give that barn dance in my honor?" Dorrie wasn't living up to Nora's idea of her—she was kicking and not nuzzling.

"What makes you think I did?" returned Tige, never having discovered just how Dorrie and her mother had received the invitation.

"You haven't forgotten the note you wrote me, have you? I've got it put away in my treasure box. I—I know it by heart. Oh, Tige—don't let that Willis girl come between us! She's a horrid little flirt. She won't make you happy, Tige, ever." The kitten was both clawing and mewing now.

"I didn't write it!" The denial exploded from his lips. "It's you that's come between Nora and me!" Tige's teeth closed upon his tongue savagely. He was sorry he'd spoken; but it was the truth, and he was sick and tired of this mewling scene. This finished him with women, all right!

"What do you mean, Tige Northrup?"

Tige shrugged his shoulders. Why waste a lot of words? It wasn't getting him anywhere, except deeper in the mire of misunderstanding.

"You do love that Willis girl, then?"

"I'm off *all* women for life!" Tige snapped out his ultimatum gruffly.

Evidently Dorrie was off him, also. Her pale eyes rolled glassily beneath the gay bandanna, bound askew over her brow. She flounced to the door, teetered on the sill, and flung back at him vindictively:

"You wait! You'll be sorry. No man can insult me and get away with it!" She fled out to her car, leaving Tige in a stupor.

When he came to, he slanted a wary eye out of the window. Dorrie was humming far down the lane, the sole occupant of the car. The Widow Gruman hadn't chaperoned her daughter on this hectic visit to the Buckjump.

Tige staggered away from the window and groped his way into the kitchen. Now that Dorrie had all but gouged out his eyes, he might as well hunt up Nora and let her finish the job.

Mone's voluminous apron lay in the middle of the floor where Nora had stepped out of it. The outside door was wide open. Nora had bolted too.

"Sufferin' catamounts!" muttered Tige aloud, addressing the crumpled apron. "They's a jinx trailin' me. Why'd Mone go, and where? Nora won't ever give me a chance to square myself. Dorrie stampedin' off in a huff. Wonder what Spot Stevens would say now about me always gettin' women to pull me out of tight places?"

Tige was fighting mad. Not so much at the women as at himself. He'd bungled things rottenly. He must be a duffer. If not, why did all his affairs get snarled into such a mess?

He kicked the screen door shut with a

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bang; refused to speak to Scow Peterson, who thrust a head out of the milk house window; walked past Loop and Dummy, who were oiling sets of harness in preparation for the haying season. Tige didn't stop till he reached the corral flanking the big barn.

The boys had rounded up the horses from the marsh pasture—thirty head or more, most of them draft animals, motive power for the mowing machines, rakes, and hay wagons.

"Woof!" A rangy sorrel threw up its hammer head and rolled a wicked eye at Tige.

"Old Sledger!" Tige's jaw set aggressively. "Feel as ornery as me, huh! Fair enough—I'll go yuh a round, you man-eatin' bunch of thunder and lightnin'!" He hurried into the barn and came out carrying his bridle and saddle, also his trusty reata.

At the first cast, the loop settled over Sledger's ugly head. Tige let the outlaw run out a few coils before he took a turn around the snubbing post. He worked rapidly, determinedly, and with telling effectiveness. A blindfold was slipped over Sledger's menacing eyes, the saddle adjusted, and Tige twisted a half-hitch of the reata around the brute's nose in lieu of a bridle. He eased himself into the saddle, leaned forward, and jerked off the blindfold.

"Hi-yip! E-yah!" A shrill cowboy yell rent the air.

Sledger's sinewy body shot from the ground as though propelled from a catapult. He writhed almost double when in mid-air and hit the ground with a jolt which rattled the slats in the nearest feed-rack. Tige yelled, his spurs scratching the animal from shoulder to rump, his sombrero cuttings arcs over the horse's bowed neck, fanning first on one side then on the other.

Loop and Dummy shinned up the corral fence and perched on the top rail, arms lifting from the shoulders as they wildly cheered this suddenly gone-mad boss of the Buckjump Ranch. Scow Peterson contented himself with a stand on the ground, peering between the rails as he crow-hopped about excitedly.

Sledger, the most notorious bucker in the valley, exhibited every trick in his repertoire in a raging effort to throw the demon who forked him. The battle lasted for fifteen minutes, with Sledger finally plunging, head down, into a corner where he bawled in temporary defeat.

Tige dismounted, and as he ripped the saddle off the sweating, panting outlaw, the yellow stripes glowed in his gray eyes.

"Darned if I ain't surprised," he spoke at the first lull in the whooping praise from his cowboys. "Seems like everything else I've tackled has throwed me higher'n a long-tailed kite."

"Ride half as good as that at the rodeo, Tige, and nobody can't touch yuh," acclaimed Loop Brown.

"Sledger chucked Spot Stevens when he took a settin' on him this spring," chortled Dummy Norris gleefully. "I'm bettin' this month's wages on yuh, Tige."

"Me, too," chimed in Loop.

This month's wages. His boys were expecting their pay on the first, which was day after to-morrow! And they planned to stake it on him. Did they think he'd been joking when he spilled over at dinner about not being able to raise a dollar?

Tige had had a few moments of exhilaration when topping that viciously bucking Sledger outlaw. The horse had jolted loose his pent-up wrath, but Tige couldn't rid himself of his heavy load of responsibilities so easily. Prospects for the Buckjump's lessee were at their lowest ebb.

CHAPTER XVI.

"LIL PEANUT HOSS."

THE next two days were feverish periods for Tige Northrup. His constant impulse was to dodge a crushing weight which seemed to be suspended directly above his head. There was the messy problem of whacking up meals three times daily for the boys. Instead of gaining efficiency in the kitchen, each effort was worse than the preceding one, if such were possible.

Loop and Dummy were even more helpless than Tige, and Scow was too busy

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milking and coddling his string of cows to find a spare moment to try his hand at cooking.

Mone's continued absence was more than mystifying. To Tige, in the kitchen, it was worse than a dreaded plague, with no cure in sight. She had left no clew behind. Nobody had seen her since she had left the ranch. It was a mystery which gave every promise of remaining unsolved. It would be foolish to install a new cook before the Fourth.

Between his agonized séances in the kitchen, Tige saw that everything was in readiness for the cutting of hay. That must begin immediately after the last day of the rodeo, depending of course on whether or not he could raise sufficient money to hire a crew. Prospects were all against him, but he simply had to keep up a front. He refused to lay down on his job till he had to.

He hadn't seen Nora, nor heard from her, since Dorrie had stampeded her off the ranch. Neither did Dorrie pester him with her presence. No need of him swearing off women—they were avoiding him as though he were breaking out with the smallpox.

The 1st of July dragged around. Loop and Dummy did everything but ask him outright for the wages due them. Of course they hadn't saved a dollar from last month's pay. Scow never did hint for his money, nor spend it when he got it, so far as the boys on the ranch could find out.

Tige pretended to be too dense to heed the hints. Though he had always been happy-go-lucky, up to the time he'd signed the lease on the Buckjump, Tige didn't believe in the Lord's providing for the blind and halt, nor that manna dropped from the heavens—but somehow funds had to be forthcoming by to-morrow.

He would have to borrow at least enough to pungle up for entrance fees for the rodeo contests: fifteen dollars for the bucking contest; ten to get in on the bull-riding events, and a five-dollar fee to twirl the reata.

Thirty dollars for those items alone, and he didn't possess a third of that amount in cold cash. No wonder his impulse was to dodge overhanging swords!

Tige worried through that first day of July, managed to prepare a supper of fried ham, boiled spuds, baker's bread, and canned peaches. Scow reported that York's auto-stage had called for the second load of cream, also harped again on the necessity of buying pigs to fatten on the skim milk.

Wouldn't it be the wiser to come out flat-footed and confess to his trusted boys how hard up he was? Tige didn't know whether it was his streak of pride or a sense of shame which stalled off this confession. He let them file out of the dining room without mentioning their wages. He waded into the accumulated stack of soiled dishes, slopping soapy water all over himself and the kitchen, washing and drying the dishes.

Roundin' up dirty dishes—cook and bottle washer! That's what he was, and a *darned poor one at that!* What 'd Mone mean, sneaking off the ranch and hiding? He'd admire to find some sympathetic soul who'd listen to his tale of woe.

If Mone Flaherty had bumped into anywhere near the grief which had piled up on his shoulders, she'd have good cause to crawl into a hole and pull it in after her.

Crash! A platter oozed from his hands to the floor and broke into a hundred pieces. He'd go smash the same way. Wouldn't Spot Stevens give him the horse laugh, though, if he knew the brand of particular hell which was riding herd on him!

Tige didn't have the heart to spend the night in the bunk house with his boys. He sprawled out on the couch in the living room instead, tossing and squirming about for an hour; then he slept, which he hadn't expected to do.

He was awakened by the yodeling of Scow calling the cows. Tige sat up on the couch. The windows and doors were wide open. Blackbirds were dickering and trilling over in the tulles; a meadow lark's caroling song thrummed in his ears. He stepped to the door and yawned, filling his lungs with the fragrant morning air.

What a splendid old place the Buckjump was! His eyes traveled over the velvety expanse of ripe hay, the heavy-headed timothy growing high against the crooked rail

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fences where the irrigating ditches flowed over. Tige walked to the corner of the porch, which gave him a view of the hill pasture, the green acres stretching clear up to the timber line.

The dairy cows were ambling down to the corral in response to Scow's high-pitched yodeling. The tinkle of bells floated above the lowing of the cattle. Scow had dug up five or six of these bells and strapped them about the necks of his favorite animals.

Beyond the pasture rose the forested ridges of the Sierra. Tige's nostrils dilated—he visualized the shaded cañons, springs of cold water where the flaming cups of tiger lilies lurked among protecting willows. Then a high crest overlooking the vast expanse of spurs and peaks, meadows, and mountain lakes—the rich range where the Buckjump beef cattle fattened through the summer months.

How he loved riding this range, trailing stray critters into hidden valleys where deer jumped from cover, seeking safety in graceful flight. Night up there in the mountains—a crackling fire of pine knots, a bed of fragrant fir boughs, his sturdy pony cropping the grass near at hand.

A gay whistle shrilled the bars of "Bucking Broncho." Loop over at the watering trough, sousing his head under the water tap. Loop always whistled when he washed. Good old Loop!

Another kind of outburst—Dummy shouting at the top of his lungs, singing the words to the song which Loop was whistling. Tige hummed the tune as he cocked an ear to catch Dummy's lusty words:

My love is a rider, wild bronchos he breaks,
Though he's promised to quit it, just for my sake.
He ties up one foot, the saddle puts on,
With a swing and a jump he is mounted and gone.

The first time I met him, 'twas early one spring,
Riding a broncho, a high-headed thing.
He tipped me a wink as he gayly did go,
For he wished me to look at his bucking broncho.

Great stuff! Tige mused while Dummy yipped out the closing stanzas. Best crew of boys a man ever corralled on the same ranch, were Loop, Dummy, and Scow. And the old Buckjump—if he could only squeeze through this jam, if Mone would only come back! Nora calm down long enough for him to straighten out that Dorrie Gruman kink.

Hell—he'd have to get breakfast again!

Loop and Dummy sauntered in a half hour later. Each was resplendent in holiday attire of brilliant silk shirt, fluttering necklash, curly haired chaps, fancy-stitched boots a-jingle with spurs. Loop performed a mad buck-and-wing on the porch, calling through the window as he finished with an acrobatic flourish: "Hey, Tige, that's all the jingle I got, what my spurs make."

A none-too-subtle hint for Tige to shell out overdue wages. He bent low over the strips of bacon sizzling in the frying pan. Why hadn't he sold a bunch of young calves, that would have tided the boys over the three-day celebration? Too late, now—it 'd take a couple of days to drive the critters in from the open range.

"Lookit, Tige!" Dummy struck a matinée idol pose on the door sill. "S'posin' I meets up with Jennie Ramage right close to a sody fountain to-day? Criminies, and me all dolled up like I had a million!" Dummy tipped a wink at Loop, and Tige was neither blind nor deaf, but he forked the too-crisp bacon into a pie tin without saying a word.

Scow came in with a pitcher of thick cream, and Loop picked up the coffeepot and carried it into the dining room.

"I'll slip you some jack after we hit Susanville," said Tige, sliding into his chair. There was a way out of this jam. He hadn't allowed himself to even think it till this moment. It hurt him worse than searing his flesh with a red-hot branding iron, but he'd have to do it.

Tige hastily bolted his breakfast. He jumped up from the table, chirping to the boys as though he had shaken trouble and worry for keeps: "Say, I can't let you guys douse my shinin' light! I'm goin' to doll up prettier'n a sore thumb myself." He hurried over to the bunk house, whistling to counteract that all-gone sensation in the pit of his stomach.

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When Tige emerged from the bunk house he was shaved and bathed; a gay orange bandanna matched his dyed goat-hair chaps, his blue silk shirt was gathered about his narrow hips by a carelessly drooping cartridge belt.

He wore his best sombrero, a five-gallon beaver, and with silver-mounted spurs buckled to his high-heeled boots, Tige Northrup could have passed muster with the pick of the movie heroes.

"I ain't s'prised Dorrie Gruman's plumb bughouse about yuh, Tige," declared Dummy.

A single quick glance satisfied Tige that Dummy was merely expressing frank admiration, so Tige ignored the crack.

"Hustle into your duds, Scow. We can't be late for the pee-rade." He scanned Peterson's drab work clothes critically.

"Ay see all the buckarooin' Ay want ven you ride dat Sledger horse."

"Aw, Scow, come on!" urged Loop, knotting a red ribbon he'd appropriated from Belle Ramage to his bridle.

"No; Ay tank Ay not go. Dem cows must be milked." Scow grinned contentedly. His string of dairy cows spelled more to him than any exhibition of bronco-busting and bull riding.

"Darn it, Scow, I'm sorry," began Tige, but Scow interrupted.

"Ay like better stay here, Tige. You beat dat Stevens faller, dat's all I ask—beat him gude and planty."

"I'll sure do my durndest, Scow. Well, we've gotta be hoppin' along." Tige edged into the house and filled a pocket with sugar cubes. Never was a pony more fond of sweets than Peanut.

The morning was still young when the cowboys clattered down the Buckjump lane. The main road to town was already dotted with wagons, horsemen, automobiles; flurries of dust spread out in thin streamers.

Raucous whoops echoed throughout the valley as groups of punchers raced their ponies. Auto horns honked and shrieked, the cars shooting past the slower going horse-drawn vehicles. Willow Creek was pouring its populace in a steady stream to Susanville's Annual Fair and Rodeo.

Indians trailed along with more dignity than their white brothers. Some of the redskins hailed from as far north as the Modoc lava beds. Others joining the caravan at various in-between points. They had been encouraged to don war paint and feathers to add a wildly picturesque touch to the festivities. Most of them had gladly complied, reveling in this opportunity to revert to type.

The Buckjump boys entered into the roistering spirit of the holiday, racing and yelling, kicking up just as much dust as any other hilarious outfit. Tige wouldn't be a gloom. He'd shake all responsibilities—forget that he'd leased the Buckjump, and entered into the spirit of the celebration exactly as he used to do when he lived up to his reputation of valley cut-up.

Easy enough to make such resolves, second nature for him and Peanut to jump into the noisy, exuberant stampede to town; but Tige was sick at heart, notwithstanding his devil-may-care pose.

Soon as he rode into Susanville, he headed straight for the Rodeo headquarters. He dismounted, fished lumps of sugar from his pocket, and Peanut's velvety nose nuzzled into the palm of his hand. Tige wiped the stickiness onto his chaps, stiffened his spine, and walked into the committee room.

Cowboys were grouped about the long table strewn with rodeo advertising matter, and the books in which names must be registered and fees paid by those participating in the contests.

There was one man in particular whom Tige was seeking. He was seated at the far end of the table, mouthing a big cigar.

"Hello, Joe! Heard you wanted to throw a saddle on the best lil cowpony in the State!" He'd always razzed Joe Clute in some such fashion as this, baiting him for the fun of the thing.

For Clute had, time and again, tried to buy Peanut. He admired the well trained and spirited saddle animal, had made Tige a standing offer of two hundred dollars for the pony.

Joe Clute, rising to the bait as usual, reached for his checkbook and waved it aloft.

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"I'll call your bluff pronto, Tige!"

"Done! Plunk down two hundred bucks and the deal's closed."

"What's wrong?" Clute shifted the cigar and cocked an eye doubtfully at Tige. "Haven't foundered the pony, have you?"

"Foundered Peanut! Say, that pony's too wise for that. You couldn't make him drink when he's all het up. Never did see such a smart hoss in my life."

"Where is he?"

"Out in front."

Clute was plainly puzzled. "Hard pressed for cash, Tige?"

Tige nodded his head silently.

"Too bad—I'd heard you were sort of up against the real thing out at the Buckjump. Well, sorry for you, but I'm sure tickled to get the pony." He filled out the check quickly, as though he were still in doubt about Tige's being in earnest. He tore the bit of paper from the stub and shoved it across the table.

"They's one favor I'm askin' of you, Joe."

"Spill it."

"I'd like to use Peanut in the ropin' contests—that's all."

"Sure; Keep him till after the celebration. I'm too busy to see to him now. Fetch him down to my ranch afterward, Tige."

"Thanks, Joe." Tige wheeled abruptly and stalked out of the committee room, brushing past a number of his cowboy friends without seeing them.

He'd sold Peanut! The only thing he'd possessed on which he could realize ready money.

The pinto nickered when Tige walked blindly out of the door.

"You ain't mine—no more you ain't, Peanut!" The pony lipped at his pocket, and Tige groped about till he found a cube of sugar.

He'd given two months' wages for the pony that first year he'd worked at the Buckjump. Dave Gruman had raised the colt—a two year old when Tige had first seen him and immediately fell hard for the lively little rascal. He'd broken him, nobody else had handled Peanut in all those three years.

Man and horse had chummed together, and Tige loved him only as a cowboy can love his faithful pony. He was trained to perfection, and the envy of every puncher who saw Tige put Peanut through his plain and fancy tricks.

Well, no sense in mooning about it. Peanut was sold! There were other saddle horses out at the Buckjump which he could ride. But he never wanted to own another pony, not after he'd gone plumb foolish over his splendid lil Peanut hoss.

CHAPTER XVII.

"PLUMB RECKLESS."

THE tooting of a band, the cheering of spectators milling up and down the walks, the weird chanting of Indians vibrating on a note higher than the yelling of cowboys, tented concessions blocking the side streets—these were the sights and sounds heralding the opening of Susanville's Annual Fair and Rodeo.

Tige Northrup, apparently deaf and blind to everything but the feeding of sugar to Peanut, was jostled by the crowds surging about him. Somebody slapped him on the back.

"Hey, cowboy, the parade's started! Hop on your hoss and git in line!"

Tige shook himself. Hadn't he decided not to moon over the selling of Peanut? And here he stood like a fool, doling out sweets to the nuzzling rascal. Of course he'd ride in the parade—Peanut cavorted like a frisky kitten chasing a rubber ball when showing off on gala occasions.

First off, though, he'd cash Joe Clute's check. Loop and Dummy needed money. He did, too, must pay his entrance fees else he'd be barred from the contests. The bank was directly opposite from where he stood. The tooting of horns and throbbing of drums increased. The cowboy band was just swinging around a corner two blocks up the street.

Tige dashed over to the bank. President Bangs, himself, cashed the check, a frozen smile curling his thin lips. Tige tucked the bills deep into his pocket, resenting that chilly reception. If that tight old Moneybags hadn't refused him a loan on

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his dairy cows, there'd have been no call to sacrifice Peanut.

The band music swirled and eddied through the windows; he'd not give Bangs another chance to highbrow him. Tige scooted out the door and across the street, mounting Peanut on the fly, and away they pranced to meet the parade.

"Lookit! Here comes the puncher who's buttered the Buckjump!" A slurring yowl from one of the mounted cowboys.

"Yah! Tige's quit buckarooin' to pail cows!"

"Ain't he the sweet lil dairymaid! Ah there, Tigie!" Shouts of laughter rose above the band music.

Tige's face flamed. The Gray Dog bunch kidding him. He saw Spot Stevens's leering grin; Canny Stokes and Johnny King with mouths stretched from ear to ear hooting at him. He was furious—hurt, too, because the boys from Crumpled Creek and Grasshopper were giving him the laugh also.

Furious, yes—but none of that outfit would know it. Tige snatched off his hat and waved it jauntily, his head was thrown back with a reckless movement, and Peanut curveted and danced in time to the lively lilt of the band.

"Yowie! Cut in here, Tige!" Loop Brown gave him the high sign.

"Some stepper, that Peanut hoss!" Bucky Simms, the best judge of horseflesh in the country, slanted approving looks at the spirited pinto. "Wanta sell him, Tige?"

"Ho, Tige sell Peanut!" jeered Dummy Norris, reining his bronco aside to make room for Tige between him and Loop. "Say, he'd sell his right laig first."

"I'm offerin' two hundred for him, spot cash," persisted Bucky Simms, who furnished bucking stock for the rodeos and made a business of buying and selling horses.

Tige shook his head.

"Better think it over, Tige," continued Simms. "I've got a buyer lookin' for a nag just about Peanut's size and color."

"You mean you'd rent him out to these professional riders," retorted Tige. "Peanut's too high strung for these locoed showoffs."

"I might get you fifty better'n two hundred," argued Simms.

Again Tige shook his head. Peanut was dancing along with the parade, now. There'd be no worrying about Joe Clute's abusing the peppy little rascal. That extra fifty dollars Simms would have paid for Peanut didn't give Tige the shadow of a regret.

Loop and Dummy were doffing their hats and grinning at Belle and Jennie Ramage who were saluting the cowboys with fluttering handkerchiefs. Tige lifted his own five-gallon sombrero, smiled, and the smile froze into a sickly grimace, for behind the cheering and laughing ranks crowding the line of march, a girl stood up in a smart-looking auto and stared straight into Tige's eyes.

Dorrie Gruman! And she'd cut him dead! The Widow Gruman sat haughtily beside her daughter, squinting near-sightedly and disinterestedly at the boisterous participants in this rural parade.

Before Tige could get his second wind after this deliberate slight, another feminine figure blinded his eyes. She was a step in advance of the very front row of spectators, little hands applauding, dark eyes sparkling and clear voice cheering the delighted buckaroos who greeted her with lusty yells of admiration.

It was Nora Willis! Brilliant as a spray of tiger lilies swaying in the breeze. Nora wearing blue and orange, the gay colors of the rodeo. She was bobbing her head at him! White teeth and dark eyes were flashing him a joyous salute.

He wouldn't have been surprised had she cut him even more frigidly and thoroughly than Dorrie had done, but there she was acting up like she was tickled pink to see him. Tige's smile, frozen on his face by Dorrie's cut direct, didn't melt. He returned Nora's glad recognition with a blank stare, too flabbergasted to unbend.

Peanut reared and waltzed past Nora and when it was too late, Tige turned, his heart leaping wildly, her name springing from his lips happily. But Nora's back alone was visible, and the next instant she was swallowed up in the crowd.

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He'd cut her! Of course she wouldn't give him a chance to redeem himself. Was there ever a guy who piled up more grief than he did? If he'd filled up on loco weed he couldn't have run amuck with worse results. He'd sure been the fall guy and no mistake when he followed up that hell-bending hunch to lease the hoodooed old Buckjump Ranch.

Something clicked dangerously in Tige's inner workings. The tiger stripes flared in his gray eyes. His taut muscles relaxed and he rolled in his saddle with the reckless, swaggering motions of a cowboy lit to the eyes with liquor and avidly seeking trouble.

"Ya-hoo! Yi-yip!" His yell startled the ponies in his immediate vicinity. A second yell spread the panic to the next section.

"Wowie! Tige's woke up!" A gusty whoop from Loop Brown, who echoed that ringing, rending cry of the ranges.

"Criminies! This is suthin' like!" Dummy Norris joined in on the chorus and the mounted cowboy band, leading the parade, ceased tooting brass horns and pounding drums. Their ponies had bolted to keep a jump ahead of the snorting and rearing platoon behind them.

Indian war cries added to the din of thudding hoofs and lusty-lunged buckaroos. The parade seethed into a free-for-all race for the Fair Grounds, each contingent of riders striving to forge into the lead.

The excitement spread to the onlookers crowding the scheduled line of march through the main streets of the town. There were frantic scurryings to witness the spectacle of a parade gone wild. Many were disappointed, for the stampede volleyed down the wide highway, its goal the grand stand which loomed on the sage flat a mile beyond the town limits.

Off they tore in a thundering dash, a whooping, roistering mob, six-guns popping in an increasing fusillade.

The cowboys streamed into the arena fronting the grand stand, leaving in their wake eddies of dust and the acrid odor of powder smoke which floated over the town as thickly as clouds of sulphuric ash erupted from the crater of distant Mount Lassen.

"Hey!" The alto horn player squirmed out of the coils of that enormous instrument and gurgled: "Who speeded up the ol' peerade, anyhow?"

"Tige Northrup!" shouted Bucky Simms, doubling up with laughter at a cowboy drummer who was struggling to keep his seat with his pony bucking furiously at every thumping bounce of the big drum strapped to the saddle.

"Well, we sure pepped up some livelier'n a funeral, I'm tellin' the hump-backed world," chortled a red-headed puncher from Fall River.

"Look at 'em trailin' us!" Loop Brown pointed toward town. "We've drawed a humdinger of a crowd, all right!"

"Reckon we've got to throw a few more thrills, long's we've pulled a runnin' start," suggested Tige, lounging easily in his saddle.

"Wish they'd named you rodeo boss, Tige," proclaimed Bucky Simms. "I allus did admire your speed, once you let go and gets plumb reckless."

"I'm takin' a settin' at the broncs and bulls, Bucky," said Tige. "Goin' in for the ropin' stunts, too. Hear you've rounded up some cagy outlaws for us to top off."

"You said it! They's some hungry wolves in them pens, guaranteed to pitch the best of you so high you'll come down just in time for them maneaters to gobble you for breakfast." Bucky was bragging extravagantly. He prided himself upon furnishing the rodeos with the wickedest outlaws to be found.

"Suits me," from Tige. He didn't add that he was feeling plenty ornery enough himself to make a fitting playmate for wolf-hungry outlaws.

The grand stand was filling rapidly. The crowd was evidently anticipating a cracking good show, since the street parade had given promise of much that was out of the ordinary. The cowboys were gathered in groups in the lee of the bucking pens, corrals and chutes across the race course from the grand stand.

The officials filed out from the spectators and entered their quarters. Tige hadn't put up his entrance fees as yet. He must attend to that important business before the first event was announced.

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But before he did that, there was another matter to clear up. He vaulted from his saddle and walked up to Loop Brown and Dummy Norris who seemed to be more than usually concerned in his actions.

"Here, you birds," Tige produced a roll of bills. "Slip this into your jeans. It's your jack for last month's wages."

"Thanks, Tige." Loop thrust his wad of currency away without counting it. Dummy did likewise.

"You goin' to horn in on any of the stunts?" asked Tige. "If you are, come on. I've got to pungle up for mine pronto." He strode off to the committee quarters, Loop and Dummy jingling their spurs as they accompanied him.

Tige paid his money and saw that it was properly credited to him.

"All right, your turn, Loop."

"Nope; me and Dummy're goin' to ride herd for yuh, Tige," said Loop solemnly. "And look here, Tige—yuh'd ought not to be drinkin', honest yuh oughtn't." It was a sincere protest from Loop, and Dummy chipped in with his argument:

"We're bettin' on yuh, Tige. Spot Stevens's gang is whoopin' it up strong fer him. They're takin' every bet that's offered. Yuh can ride all 'round Spot if yuh stay sober. So yuh oughta lay off the booze till after the round-up, Tige."

"Who says I've been drinkin'?" snorted Tige, and to prove it false, he blew his breath in their faces.

"Criminies! It was the way yuh tore loose suddent-like in that there pee-rade." A great sigh of relief from Dummy.

"Bully fer Tige!" Loop reached forth a browned fist and wrung his boss's hand. "We'd 'a' bet on yuh, drunk er sober, Tige—but I'm plumb tickled yuh're all gingered up 'thout getting a snootful. Yuh never can tell what this pizen jackass 'll do to a guy."

"Huh, don't worry about me," said Tige gruffly. "Go on and cover your bets, only—" But why tell them he was hoodooed to a fare-you-well?

There was other stuff which did worse things to a man than poisoned jackass. But he wasn't going to spill over to Loop and Dummy. He watched them streak over to the group of cowboys rooting for Spot Stevens. Fat lot of good it'd do, pouring out his troubles. He wouldn't know where to begin, nor when to stop, with himself stacking up grief at every turn.

What'd they say if he told them how he'd raised the money which they'd pocketed so coolly? Dummy, wasn't it, who'd told Bucky Simms that he, Tige, would sell his right leg before he'd part with Peanut? And out of that two hundred dollars, he had just seventy dollars left.

Seventy dollars on which to run the Buckjump! A hay crew to hire soon as the rodeo was over with—a cook, too. Mone wasn't coming back—Tige firmly believed that by now. The Buckjump wouldn't be the same jolly place with any one but good old Mone in the kitchen.

What'd he do next time the lure of those dim trails called to him? No Peanut to saddle and bridle and whisk him away into the mountains. The bulliest best pal a man ever had, was that dandy Peanut hoss. No staking him out with a rope, no hobbling his feet, all he did was to peel off saddle and bridle and turn him loose to rustle his feed.

Many times he'd awakened at night to see Peanut standing near his bed of boughs. He'd talk to the pony, fling out a hand, and nothing was more chummy and fine than the feel of that velvety nose rubbing against his hand.

Peanut and Nora—and Mone—all of them gone out of his life. Dorrie Gruman cutting him cold. Seemed like that lease on the Buckjump was trimming him of everything worth while. Spot Stevens's curse was sure working overtime—he'd been floundering in hell ever since he'd signed that hoodoo of a lease.

But where did this whining stuff get him? Nowheres a-tall! He'd jumped into this rodeo business with a whoop and a hurrah—jazzed up the parade and put on a dashing front. He'd carry on in the same spirit. Loop and Dummy were already staking their month's wages on him. Betting the money which he'd raised by selling Peanut.

Would he lose it for them? He'd always walked off with some of the first prizes in

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these rodeos—especially in the bucking contests. Maybe he'd been too darned ambitious, trying to hop out of the buckaroo class and prance round as the lessee of a whacking big cattle ranch.

Nobody could hand him a word of praise in that venture, but as a buckaroo—Dorrie Gruman's words flashed through his mind.

Fearless and splendid!

He'd be that and more. What did he care what happened to him? The bigger and more desperate the chances, the harder he'd go after 'em.

"Sufferin' catamounts! That's the hand I'll play—plumb reckless!" Tige muttered the edict under his breath. He smiled, but it wasn't the insipid smile painted upon the face of that poster hero, and the gray eyes glowed with a fire which would have scorched holes through any lithographed poster.

Once again Tige Northrup shook off the weight of responsibilities. He let go with a vengeance, and his swagger was that of a "plumb reckless hombre."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WEK-WEK, THE INDIAN.

TIGE NORTHRUP careened through the first two days of the rodeo with blustering, bragging arrogance. Not all bluster at that, for he'd topped the wickedest outlaws successfully, rode the wildest and ugliest bulls till the judges' pistols proclaimed him victorious. He'd twirled his reata with the best of the rope tossers and walked off with the honors.

That was the life!

The intoxicating applause of the packed grand stand and bleachers rang in his ears like sweetest music. The admiring cheers of his cowboy acquaintances filled him with pride; the envious jibes of Spot Stevens and his backers merely egged Tige on to the accomplishing of more daring stunts.

His luck had turned. He was the star performer, winning every event in which he entered.

It was exhilarating to hear his name bawled through the announcer's megaphone; listen to the buzzing comments about his skill, his fearlessness, his perfect seat on the hardest bucking broncho.

Wolf of the World! They'd called him that, and Old Tiger Stripes!

Tige the Terrible—that after he'd made a flying leap for the vicious bull which had thrown Spot Stevens. It was the most spectacular deed of those first two days.

Tige's name and number had been called early in the bull-riding contest. He'd drawn a bearcat, too, but had qualified for the finals. Spot hadn't been so fortunate, being thrown a second before the judge had fired his pistol.

The bull had swung about and lunged for Spot, and would have gored the fallen cowboy if Tige hadn't bounded out from the buckaroos gathered in front of the chutes. He'd yelled and brandished his hat, attracting the bull's attention.

Then, with a prodigious leap he had leaped upon the back of the animal. He'd raked the brute with biting spurs while the frenzied creature had heaved and twisted, finally charging across the arena, bawling furiously, Tige waving his sombrero and sitting pretty.

"Hi-yip! Lookit, it's Tige the Terrible!" The cry had soared above the cheering crowds. Several of his stanch admirers claimed to have originated the term. Even so, it seemed to fit him better than Wolf of the World or Old Tiger Stripes.

"Tige the Terrible!" He awoke with that wild-sounding name thrumming in his ears. It was scarcely dawn and this the morning of the third and last day of the rodeo. The finals were to be ridden to-day. The judges had picked the best riders from those who had qualified in the preliminaries. Tige had qualified in both the bull-riding and bucking contests. To-day would decide who was to be awarded the biggest prizes of the show.

The betting was strongly in Tige's favor for the bull riding, since Spot Stevens had been ruled out of that because of his spill. But Spot had topped his bucking horses with ease—these two rivals were to be pitted against each other in this picturesque and daredevil sport.

The top rider from the Gray Dog Ranch

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had a boasting, loyal following. Spot made light of his failure to stick to that measly old bull, just an accident, that was all. Furthermore, Spot openly boasted that he'd ride circles round Tige Northrup when it came to the grand final test in broncho busting.

Tige sat up in bed on this eventful morning. Neither he, Loop nor Dummy had returned to the Buckjump since they'd trooped into town. They had rented a room in a lodging house bearing the breezy name of the "Cowboys' Corral."

Bully old Loop and Dummy! Tige listened to the snorings which vibrated the cots upon which his cowboys were sleeping. They had been his faithful shadows throughout these roistering days and nights.

The pair of them weren't taking any chances of his running foul of scheming punchers who carried flasks on their hips. He had to keep in trim for the finals—they'd wagered their last dollar on his winning that bucking contest.

And he would win it! He couldn't fall down on that—Tige felt the confidence of success in his very bones. Fearless and splendid—that had been the slogan he'd repeated time and again during these past forty-eight hours. It was pulling him through with flying colors—as a buckaroo.

"Tige the Terrible!" Was it because of the gray light of dawn that he didn't thrill as he breathed that name? He'd tingled to his finger tips yesterday when the crowds roared it and the cowboys had slapped him on the back and tagged at his heels, boasting of his nerve and reckless skill, proud to be spoken to by the hero of the rodeo.

A year ago, even six months back, he'd believed himself hoisted to the top of the world with such a reputation. What ailed him this morning? Why couldn't he shunt clear into the back of his mind all that rotten business connected with his lease on the Buckjump?

He hadn't told Loop and Dummy about the offer he'd had from that spick-and-span bird who claimed he was rounding up a few crack riders for a Wild West show.

The man threw a lot of bull about never having seen a prettier and better rider than himself—peddled some hot air about his good looks, too. Big money if he'd sign up—and a contract had been flashed before his eyes.

Tige wouldn't. Couldn't leave his ranch. Oh, sure, he was running the Buckjump—best cattle ranch up in Willow Creek Valley. The man had been impressed with this information, and Tige had winced and abruptly left him.

He'd been sorely tempted to sign that contract, slide out from under the obligations of that miserable lease. He couldn't explain to himself, exactly, why he hadn't been won over by the man's proposition. Another instance of two separate selves within him, one wheedling him to let the Buckjump go hang, the other self refusing to give up that damnable struggle.

Who'd give a whoop in hell, besides Loop and Dummy and Scow, if he fell down on that lease? Go back there with no Mone in the kitchen, and no Peanut to ride the cattle trails! It was awful.

He'd seen Nora a hundred times in these two days and nights, at the rodeo grounds, on the streets, visiting the concessions, at the open air dances.

She was too darned busy cheering for Spot Stevens, dancing with him; flirting with other fellows, smiling and talking to everybody but him. He hadn't meant to cut her when she had spoken to him the day of the parade. But that was Nora—wouldn't give him a chance to explain.

She still believed he was shining up to Dorrie Gruman. Didn't know that Dorrie had cut him dead, that he'd spilled over and queered himself proper with Dorrie and the Widow Gruman, too; for of course the girl had run to her mother with that yarn of having been insulted.

When it came right down to bare facts, it was because of Nora he'd leased the Buckjump. He'd told her that more than once. Why couldn't she believe him? The darned little wildcat! And now that she had thrown him down cold, why stick to that old tangle of haywire?

Why? Tige shook his head. Every argument favored his jumping the lease. He hadn't had a happy or a peaceful hour since he'd tried to manage the ranch on his own hook. But he was sticking—or was

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he? Soon as he'd decided one way, that other self would bob into the argument and he'd flounder about helpless as a locoed steer mired down in deep, black mud.

Through the one window in the room, the gray of dawn began to glow with tints of pearl and rose. Tige threw off the sheet under which he had slept and swung his feet to the floor.

There was no interruption in the rhythmic snorings of Loop and Dummy. Tige dressed himself quietly—he'd go for a walk up the Susan River. He hadn't been able to shake his two close-sticking pals since they'd hit town.

All dressed up but his boots, Tige gathered these under his arm and padded to the door in his stocking feet. He turned the knob and pushed the door open softly. His foot kicked a folded bit of paper from the sill and into the narrow hall.

Closing the door, Tige stooped and picked up the paper. It was too dim in the hall to more than make out the tracery of writing, so Tige tiptoed to the outside door, which gave upon a small porch fronting the street.

With his boots tucked under one arm, Tige unfolded the paper and deciphered the penciled scrawl.

"Sufferin' catamounts!" His boots fell to the porch with clumps, unnoticed by Tige, who scanned the note for the second time, spelling out each word slowly and carefully.

"Cum to the foot uv Antelope soons ye git this. It's me what's in trubble an' wantin' to see yez alone. MONE."

Mone in trouble and sending for him!

Tige shoved the scrap of paper into his pocket and hastily jerked on a boot. It was like receiving a message from the dead, hearing from Mone after a whole week after her disappearance. He'd given up hope, couldn't even guess what had happened to her.

Tige wedged a foot in the second boot and yanked at the straps. She wanted to see him alone—and at the foot of Antelope Mountain! He leaped off the porch and ran toward the livery stable where Peanut was comfortably stalled.

But how did Mone know where to locate him? Could there be some trickery in this note? His rivals plotting to get him out of town? Tige's suspicions were aroused. He pulled the crumpled paper out of his pocket and read it for the third time, but didn't stop running for the stable.

Mone's writing! He couldn't be mistaken in that. He'd always been amused at her cramped and tiny letters—she was so big and husky. The words were spelled same as she pronounced them, too. No two ways about it, Mone had scrawled this message—was in trouble and calling on him for help.

Tige arrived at the stable. Nobody stirring. He didn't call the nightman, and it was yet too early for the day force to be on duty. He streaked for Peanut's stall and hastily saddled and bridled the pony.

He rode out of the barn just as the sun slanted its first rays above the smoky-blue range of mountains bulking to the eastward of Honey Lake. Not more than half a dozen people were visible on the main street—a couple of frowzy cowboys hailed him as he cantered past the Paint Can.

Tige waved to them mechanically and kept on going. A light dawned upon him as he veered off the main thoroughfare and into the tree-arched side street which merged into the road leading to Willow Creek Valley.

Mone had returned to the Buckjump. Scow had told her where he, Tige, was. She'd sent the note on by some one from the valley—didn't want to interfere with his rodeo stunts—that's why she'd meet him at the foot of Antelope.

Good old Mone!

Lucky that he'd awakened so early. He'd have plenty of time to ride there and back before the finals. The bull riding was advertised to begin at ten in the morning, the bucking contest at two in the afternoon.

"Hop along, Peanut, ol' pal!" Tige bent forward in the saddle and Peanut, just beginning to limber up, speeded on at a faster clip. "Mone's come back, Peanut! Good old Mone. Says she's in trouble, but, shucks, she does get freaky spells, Mone does. But, gosh, Peanut—I don't give a whoop if it's murder she's committed, we'll

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stick by Mone Flaherty, won't we, Peanut?"

On and on loped the pinto, traveling the gritty, sage-lined road with a springy clitter-clatter of flying hoofs. Six miles to the foot of Antelope from Susanville, with only a couple of easy hills between. They'd make it before the sun was an hour high, for already they'd covered half the distance.

Would Mone be there to meet him? She wouldn't keep him waiting, not if she knew he was billed to ride against Spot Stevens that very afternoon.

Peanut topped the second hill, and there was only a fraction more than a mile to go from there. The road dipped into a shallow wash and Tige looked ahead, scanning the sagebrush and rocks dotting the lower slope of Antelope Mountain. The road resembled a dusty white ribbon looped in a great letter U where it skirted the dry wash and began the ascent of the long, steep grade.

The Ramsay Ranch snuggled in a cove a mile to the west; a huddle of shacks lay nearly as far to the south where a colony of Indians had squatted near a pond formed by the seepage of irrigating waters.

Clumps of mountain mahogany and scrub juniper formed splotches of dark green among the drab gray of the sage. The wagon road threaded the sidling slope of the mountain and was visible till it wound between the cleft peaks at the summit.

Not a sign of anything moving, either up or down the grade. How would Mone be traveling—not horseback, and it was a good fifteen miles to the Buckjump. Had she written the note yesterday, the day before? Tige's gray eyes swept the section of sageland bordering the road.

He fished out the scrap of paper and studied it again. It wasn't dated. When had Mone written it? Peanut slowed to a walk, and Tige halted him at the foot of the mountain. Mone wasn't there. She might be concealed in one of those clumps of mahogany.

"Mone! Yu-hoo, Mone!" He called her name repeatedly.

Could she have meant the other side of the mountain—over in Willow Creek Valley? Tige looked at his watch. Six o'clock. Would he have time to make the grade? It was a stiff, hard pull up and over Antelope, one hour to get over, two more hours to ride back to Susanville. No telling how long Mone would detain him.

He'd surely have to allow for four hours if he climbed the grade. That'd mean ten o'clock, the hour set for the bull-riding finals.

Peanut's head went up in the air warily, his ears twitched, and the sensitive nostrils dilated.

"Mone!" Tige pivoted quickly in his saddle, eyes raking the thicket of mahogany toward which the pony's nose was pointed.

A figure writhed from the brush and sulked toward Tige. It wasn't Mone, but an Indian youth, slim, brown, and snaky—eyes of a smoky brown which glinted through a mat of black, oily bangs.

"Wek-Wek!" Tige rose in his stirrups, calling to the lad, who ducked behind a sagebrush, crouching low as though poised for flight.

"Wek-Wek, who sent you here?" Tige reined Peanut closer to the Indian.

Wek-Wek edged away, motioning with a graceful fling of his brown hand and a flirt of his head for Tige to follow him.

Like the dumb Injun! He was never known to say more than one word at a speaking, and then used signs. That's why his parents had named him Wek-Wek, their native word for magpie. The papoose made them think of a chattering magpie because he was so different!

And there he stood, beckoning Tige to follow him, now darting off through the brush, padding along a cow trail which sheered off at a sharp angle from the wagon road and threaded Snowshoe Cañon. That was a steep and seldom-used shortcut trail to Round Valley, directly back of Buckjump Ranch.

Tige spurred Peanut and overhauled the nimble-footed Indian.

"Here, you, Wek-Wek!" Tige spoke curtly. There was something woozy and uncertain about this business of blindly playing tag with a dumb Injun. "Who sent you here?"

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"Mone!" That single word uttered in a low guttural.

"Where is she now?" demanded Tige.

A wave of the hand, a fling of the black, oily head indicating Snowshoe Cañon, and Wek-Wek broke away from Tige and sped up the steep trail.

Tige hesitated. Was the Indian leading him over the mountains to the Buckjump? He couldn't cover that distance and get back to Susanville in time for the bull-riding contest. He might even be late for the bucking finals—that'd give the victory to Spot Stevens. He'd forfeit that precious money prize. And he needed it—needed it to hire a hay crew, haying must start tomorrow!

Wek-Wek halted, balancing his slim body on a bowlder far up the cañon and facing Tige. He threw up an arm in a wild, free gesture, tossed his black mane upward in a graphic signal, then turned and sinuously climbed the trail.

Mone was in trouble. She'd sent for him! There was something desperately, fatefully compelling in Wek-Wek's sign language. A week since Mone had disappeared. He had to go to her—her life might be at stake. He couldn't return to the rodeo grounds and ride in the finals, not until he'd solved this devilish mystery.

And if he didn't get back in time? More of his hellish luck—he couldn't dodge the hoodoo which had him roped, with the coils tightening at every jump.

Tige muttered to Peanut and the pony scrambled up the trail, following the lead of Wek-Wek, the dumb but compelling Indian guide.

CHAPTER XIX.

DOWN SNOWSHOE CAÑON.

SURE-FOOTED and agile, Peanut seemed to sense the driving necessity of haste which tensed the nerves of his master. The pony needed neither spurring nor guidance in keeping to the trail twisting up Snowshoe Cañon. Wek-Wek, the Indian lad, danced on ahead, evasive as a coppery will-o'-the-wisp, invisible most of the time.

Tige couldn't catch up with him and fretted when the Indian was not in sight, swore audibly when that wilderness sprite bobbed a dusky head above a clump of manzanita, disappeared and then, from a bowlder farther up the cañon, beckoned with a waving hand.

Only on rare occasions had Tige traveled this short-cut trail to Susanville. True, it saved several miles, but that was offset by the roughness and steepness of the faint cattle path.

Manzanita and buckbrush matted the walls of the cañon; alders and willows overhung the stream of water cascading over the rocky bed. The singing murmur of the brook rose to a babbling roar where it tumbled over obstructing logs and miniature cliffs.

The course of the trail lay above the creek bed, crossing slides of loose shale, skirting volcanic bluffs, threading thickets of underbrush shadowed by tall, slim pines.

The sun hadn't penetrated the cañon—it was cool and dank. Squirrels scuttled about in the interlacing branches overhead; a covey of mountain quail whirred from a copse of service berry bushes, their whistlings mingling musically with the babble of the brook. Bluejays scolded, their flickering plumage adding color to the varying shades of green.

Through an upslanting vista mid the trees, Tige glimpsed a patch of sky—they'd been climbing for an hour and were nearing the apex of the cañon. Wek-Wek, clinging to a jutting ledge, was outlined against the sky. A wave of his hand, and he was gone.

Peanut picked his way gingerly and cautiously up a narrow ledge, and Tige heaved a sigh of relief when the pony scaled the last dangerous pitch. This was the summit—the trail followed the gentle slope of a plateau studded with trees.

Pine needles lay in thick layers, and Peanut's hoofs thudded softly as he quickened his pace. Tige was trying to overhaul the Indian lad, but Wek-Wek kept in the lead, darting in and out among the tree trunks, shy as a woodland creature.

"Hold on, Wek-Wek!" Tige called, but

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the Indian ran on, looking over his naked, gleaming shoulder, fleet as a deer pursued by dogs.

A bunch of Buckjump cattle crashed through the brush and loped up a hillside, startled by the Indian runner. The woods were patterned with a network of trails in this section, leading to springs and favorite feeding grounds.

This was Buckjump range and Peanut nickered, sensing that he was headed for the home corral. They topped a low water shed, and the pony trotted down the pleasant slope which merged into a meadow fringing Round Valley. Over the next ridge, and only four miles distant, lay the Buckjump buildings.

Peanut lowered his head and plunged through a thicket of quaking aspens. Tige threw up an arm to shield his face from the brittle branches, craning his neck to catch a glimpse of Wek-Wek. He saw him, poised at the edge of another grove of aspens, a brown arm pointing toward a log cabin built beneath a big pine.

Then Wek-Wek darted among the silvery trunks of aspen trees, vanishing completely.

That farewell gesture plainly indicated that Wek-Wek had finished his duty as guide. Tige stared at the square, stanchly-constructed cabin, the roof steeply pitched to shed the heavy fall of winter snow.

He knew the cabin well—it was on Buckjump ground, had been built, according to Dave Gruman's account, fifty years ago by a Swiss dairyman. It hadn't been used for years, but was in a remarkable state of preservation.

The massive hinges, handwrought out of wagon tires, still held up the heavy door. The windows were merely small squares hewn in the logs, portholes in case of an Indian attack in those early, pioneer days. A great stone fireplace and chimney bulked against one end of the cabin.

Why had Wek-Wek pointed to that old log cabin. Tige was riding past the aspen grove where he'd last seen the Indian. Was it possible that Mone Flaherty had sought refuge here? He wasn't sure that she even knew there was such a historic shack on the range.

Peanut's head flew up, the sensitive ears twitched backward. The warning came the fraction of a second too late. The loop of a reata dropped over Tige's shoulders, was jerked taut, pinioning his arms tight.

He snapped his head about, tried to dodge the second loop which whistled through the air. He wasn't successful, the noose coiled around his neck, was pulled chokingly snug. The next instant Tige hit the ground with a jarring, jolting thump.

He rolled over to slacken the nooses—but skilled ropers were at the opposite ends. They kept the reatas taut and were upon him, two of them, their faces covered by colored bandannas.

Tige was securely hog-tied by men who were expert in that particular branch of roping. Not a word was spoken. The attack, from that first cast till the tying of that final hard knot, was carried on swiftly and silently.

That accomplished, one of the men mounted, took a turn of the longer reata about his saddle horn and dragged Tige over to the door of the log cabin, his companion walking beside Tige.

"Shoot that fightin' fool if she sticks her head out!" A nasal threat, uttered in a loud and disguised voice, by the cowboy who turned the key in the rusty old padlock fastening the door.

The second cowboy had hopped off his pony. The pair of them grabbed hold of Tige. They pitched him through the partially-opened doorway. The heavy door was hastily pulled to with a bang. The rasping of the key in the padlock penetrated to Tige's ears.

He was tricked! That note was faked. Spot Stevens's dirty work—he was afraid to meet him in that final bucking contest! Those two hombres were Johnny King and Canny Stokes, Gray Dog cowboys and friends of Spot.

What was it they'd said—"Shoot that fightin' fool if she—"

"Mone!" Tige writhed to a sitting posture. His hands were tied behind his back. The light filtered dimly through the small portholes. It was a minute before he could see that no other person was in the main room of the cabin.

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Two rooms only in the cabin. Tige squirmed and rolled to the connecting doorway and peered into the old kitchen. Nobody in there. Why had they shouted that warning—the only words they'd spoken?

Hog-tied and locked up in this Indian-proof log cabin! Tige strained at the coils of rope binding his arms—no give to them at all. He braced his bound feet against the jamb of the door, raised his shoulders to the opposite casing, and pried himself to a standing position. He could look into both rooms from that doorway.

There were signs everywhere that some one had recently occupied the cabin, a couple of buggy robes heaped upon freshly-cut fir boughs in one of the bunks built to the wall of the front room, part of a loaf of bread on the crude kitchen table—a bucket half filled with water.

What was that object at the foot of the bunk? Tige's eyes narrowed suspiciously. He crow-hopped across the puncheon floor, stopped at the side of the bunk and leaned over from his hips.

A woman's hat! Mone's! He recognized the feather and the bow of green ribbon.

"Shoot that fightin' fool—" Those Gray Dog punchers knew she'd been here, thought she was still a prisoner when they threw him in the door.

Tige slumped upon the bunk, discovered the checkered cape tangled up with the buggy robes. The mystery of Mone's disappearance was solved—Spot Stevens had kidnaped her, locked her up in this lonely, deserted old log cabin. Another of his low-down tricks to keep Tige in hell—why hadn't he suspected Spot in the first place?

Why? Because it didn't seem possible that Spot could have coaxed or bribed Mone a foot away from the Buckjump ranchhouse. How had he managed it? Not by force; Loop and Dummy would have heard the rumpus, for Mone was a scrapper and she hated Spot and his gang worse than rattlesnakes.

"Mone! It's Tige! Where are you, Mone?" Had she been bullied, badly treated? Was there a nook in these empty, low-ceiled old rooms where she could have hidden?

Tige peered under the bunk. There was a clutter of pine needles and dust only. The ceiling was of roughly-hewn planks and not a break in it. The square port holes were too small to squeeze through, so Mone hadn't escaped that way. Out into the kitchen were a couple of up-ended apple boxes and a table, made of ax-hewn pine, and the yawning fireplace, nothing else, more port holes for windows.

They'd surely picked a prison strong enough to hold a desperate criminal. The note she'd written—they'd forced her to do that.

Forced Mone Flaherty! She was sharp-witted enough to have guessed Spot was up to some rotten trick, having her write such a note. But wait—Tige leaned against the solid masonry of the fireplace.

He'd been the thick-headed fool! Hadn't he suspected there was trickery after he'd read that note? Mone gave him credit for not being such a plumb idjit as to come tearing off to the foot of Antelope all by his lonesome. Of course, she hoped he'd have smelled a rat, would have brought Loop and Dummy along—not fallen into this trap.

But he had; was penned in here helpless as a hog-tied calf chucked into a box stall. The rodeo finals would be pulled off without him. He'd lose out, Spot would win. He deserved to lose; he was the prize easy mark of the ranges.

Gone was that big money prize of five hundred dollars, which Spot would carry off with a slick smirk. He was far and away the best rider, next to himself. First money for the bull-riding finals amounted to two hundred and fifty dollars—that was lost, too.

He'd thrown away a total of seven hundred and fifty dollars because he hadn't used his fool brains. And that was the money he'd counted on to put up his hay crop, hire a crew, put him on his feet at the Buckjump!

Mone had made her escape, or had Spot let her go? Else dragged her off to another hole in the wilderness?

Darned funny that puncher had shouted that warning before he unlocked the door. Tige shook his befuddled head, wrenched at the ropes binding his arms and legs.

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The minutes were flying. It must be ten o'clock, the hour set for the bull riding. Good-by to that two hundred and fifty prize!

If he could only wriggle out of these damnable ropes! If Mone were only locked up with him, she could have loosened the knots. Even then, how could he break out of this prison? The logs were huge things, the ceiling solid, the windows too small to squeeze through. A regular fortress—that's why the log cabin had withstood the ravages of fifty years.

Damned clever of that foxy Spot Stevens to hit upon this cabin for his rotten trick. Had he planned this all out before he'd kidnaped Mone?

Tige's eyes lit upon a fragment of stone in the ashes of the fireplace. There was a ragged edge to it—he immediately put into action the idea which flashed through his mind. He dropped to his knees and then rolled to his side, meaning to root the stone out upon the floor and see if he couldn't cut the ropes binding his hands by rubbing them against the jagged surface.

"Sufferin' catamounts!" The exclamation volleyed from his lips.

There was an irregular pyramid of stones piled in the deepest angle of the fireplace. Above the crest of that hastily-built pyramid daylight streamed through a jagged hole in the masonry of the chimney.

Mone had gouged through that old chimney! Those Gray Dog punchers didn't know she had escaped. That's why they had shouted that warning. Mone had been too slick for them. But when had she got out? How long had she dug and pried at that solid wall of rock? Where was she now? Wasn't that just like Mone—busting out of this Indian-proof fortress?

A grin of appreciation and admiration curled Tige's lips. Could he, with hands tied behind him and legs firmly roped, wriggle through that gouged-out hole in the chimney? He could, and did—by standing on his tiptoes on that wobbly pyramid and hunching his shoulders through first.

Then he pried with his fettered feet, digging his toes into the crevices of the chimney, pushing his body up inch by inch till he got far enough through to turn around and hook his bent knees over the edge of the hole. He dropped to the ground, landing on his shoulders.

Jarred some, but not hurt, Tige lay on his back, blinking at the gaping hole through which he had squirmed. Now, if he could only get free of the ropes! If they had tied his hands in front of him he could have managed. Already his wrists were chafed and tender.

His eyes appraised the outside corner of the chimney. By raising his legs he could bring the ropes in contact with that sharp edge. Tige hunched a little closer, elevated his boots, wedging one on each side of the cornice. The coils of rope were pressed hard against the hewn stones and Tige sawed up and down, up and down till the flinty surface began shredding the hempen strands.

He'd free his feet first, then he could hurry over the ridge to the Buckjump. Scow would be on the job—

He stopped the sawing of the rope abruptly. Footfalls sounded in his ears. Somebody was approaching the cabin from the front. The Gray Dog punchers returning! He couldn't be caught again, he must cut through those ropes before they discovered him. Tige worked his legs furiously, goaded on by the increasing distinctness of the footsteps.

Whoever it was, rode a horse—he could distinguish the clump of hoofs—one horse only and it was walking at a leisurely pace. Whoever it was seemed to be taking his time. Had Spot given directions for those Gray Dog devils to guard the cabin?

Ah-h! One coil fell apart under the savage grinding. A second wrapping parted. A fierce wrench of his legs and Tige was footloose. He clambered to his feet, marked time rapidly for a few moments to start the circulation in his legs.

Then he stole to the corner of the cabin and poked one eye cautiously around the wall. For as much as five seconds Tige didn't budge a muscle—then his whole body quivered and he sprang from behind the cabin and ran, crooning and mumbling as though he had gone stark, staring mad.

"Peanut! You've come back for me!

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Peanut—bulliest lil pal ever was! Wouldn't run off and desert me. Peanut—" Tige reached the nickering, sniffing pony.

Peanut nuzzled, so did Tige, since his hands were still bound behind his back.

Was there yet time to reach Susanville by two o'clock? Enter the bucking finals, beat Spot Stevens, win that five-hundred-dollar prize? The bridle reins were dragging on the ground. Tige gripped them in his teeth and Peanut lowered his sagacious head while his master looped them over his neck. Not a second to waste in grinding the ropes off his wrists. Every moment was precious.

" Peanut—we've gotta tough race ahead of us! Straight down Snowshoe Cañon, Peanut!" Tige lifted a foot to the stirrup and swung awkwardly into the saddle, bent low, and gathered up the reins in his teeth again and dropped the loop over the horn. He pressed a knee against Peanut's right shoulder and the pony turned to the left, nose pointing along the trail they had traveled that morning.

" Now, Peanut, ol' pal—speed up for the rodeo grounds! Go like hell, Peanut hoss. We gotta fly, Spot ain't got me beat, not yet he hasn't!"

The valiant cowpony struck out at a swinging lope, gathering speed over the open spaces, trotting through the aspen thickets, taking the slope out of Round Valley at a stiff canter.

" Snowshoe Cañon, Peanut! I'm givin' you your head down that ornery trail. Go to it, Peanut!" Tige crouched in the saddle.

Peanut shook his head doubtfully. His master had put him through many a reckless and daring stunt, but had never before speeded him on a free rein down a dangerous mountain trail.

That first downward dip was taken in a surprised and hesitant manner by the pony; but the beloved boss's knees pressed encouragingly against his withers. A narrow ledge was skirted at a trot, fragments of volcanic rock chipping off and hurtling down the cliffs to the bowlder-strewn creek bed far below.

How much time did he have? Tige hadn't looked at his watch since six o'clock, right after he had decided to follow Wek-Wek up this giddy old Snowshoe Cañon. How long had that crazy game of tag lasted? There was his watch, ticking safely away in his pocket and he couldn't get to it!

Where was the sun? It seemed to be casting all manner of shadows here in this old cañon. Was it noon, could it be later than that? Had he been locked up in that cabin an hour, two hours, or more?

It seemed ages to Tige—and his struggle there in the chimney—that had been a time-killer. Sawing through those pesky ropes—why, he'd been hours and hours doing that one thing.

" Faster, Peanut! Come, ol' pal, we're after that yellow Gray Dog's goat!"

The pony clattered through the shifting, slippery mass of slate, starting a young avalanche which rattled down the cañon side. It was a hundred times worse traveling the downgrade than climbing this treacherous trail. If he could only tear into Susanville before two o'clock.

Hopeless to think of making it in time for the bull-riding finals. It was long after ten o'clock, Tige knew that; but he couldn't figure whether it was twelve, or one, or two.

" Get up, Peanut! We gotta take killin' chances. We're goin' after Spot Stevens's scalp and five hundred dollars!" His spurs lightly scratched the pony's flanks.

A snort, and Peanut jumped a log blocking the trail; another jump cleared a bowlder matted with squawvine; a sliding dive down another bed of shale. On, on, in leaps and bounds, agile and reckless as a hunted buck went Peanut, Tige swaying in the saddle, helping his horse to keep a precarious balance, urging him on, though it hurt him; for Peanut trusted to his judgment.

A stumble, a hoof striking a rolling stone, a single misstep too near the edge of a narrow jutty of cliff and the race would be ended.

Down, down—the slim tree trunks whizzed past in sheets; the babble of the singing creek was muffled by the whisking of the wind created by Peanut's plunging flight.

A low branch lashed Tige across the eyes,

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blinding him for a minute. Peanut's pace didn't slacken—the pony had caught the feverish urge to risk life and limb in this mad race against time. Tige lifted his smarting lids—he saw sagebrush. They were nearing the mouth of the cañon. The foot of Antelope was not far distant. Once on a decent road and Peanut—

"Wowie!" Tige yelled, nearly toppling from his saddle when a gray body hurtled out from the brush in front of Peanut. It was a four-pronged buck bounding a length in the lead.

Peanut's nostrils dilated. He seemed to sense that this was the object of this wild dash—rounding up that deer. The pony doubled his prodigious leaps, would have swerved off the rough trail when the buck cleared the rocky bed of the creek in a mighty take-off.

Tige pressed hard and vigorously against Peanut's shoulder to keep him from following the frightened deer which disappeared up the opposite slope of the cañon.

The trees were thinning—more sagebrush. Around that next bluff and they'd be in sight of that curving U where the road approached the foot of Antelope grade.

"Peanut, you're a wonder hoss!" Tige's lips tightened. He couldn't blubber about having sold Peanut to Joe Clute. The pony might understand, but it wouldn't hurt Peanut as it hurt him. That was impossible, but Joe was good to horses. He understood 'em and that helped a lot.

Here's where he had first seen Wek-Wek, near that clump of mountain mahogany. Peanut had made the dangerous short cut trail on the run, hadn't stumbled once. That was a record which nobody 'd ever be fool enough to beat.

Tige looked at the sun. How much time did he have to make Susanville? He talked to the pony, quieted him to a running walk, then commanded him to halt at a point where he could obtain a view of the wagon road slanting up the treeless pitch of Antelope Mountain.

"Steady, Peanut. Take it easy—rest up a spell. They's six long miles yet and your legs're shaky." Tige crooned softly to the sweat-drenched animal.

The thrilling possibility of a plunge off that dangerous Snowshoe trail had kept Tige in suspense at every downward jump. With his hands bound, he could not have saved himself if Peanut had stumbled.

But he'd risked his life on the chance of making Susanville in time to answer to his name when it was shouted through the starter's megaphone. If he could only get there to ride against Spot Stevens—that urge alone was worth the risking of life and limb.

Peanut, too, had seemed equally as reckless as his master in that smashing flight. He'd piled up speed with every leap. There had been no wavering, not a second in which to pick steps, just a headlong, dizzy spurt.

But now came the killing wind-up of this race against time. The urge was fully as strong within Tige's breast, but the thrills gave way before the dull dread that all was lost. Those six miles over a comparatively smooth road stretched ahead endlessly.

Peanut had been put through grilling paces since sunup. Tige hated to use spurs, cringed at the thought of goading the game little cowpony over six more pitiless miles.

The July sun was hot out on the gray sage flat; heat waves shimmered and an acrid odor was broiled from greasewood and dried mullen.

The screech of grinding brakes startled Tige. He looked up the mountainside—a huge gasp of relief surged between his lips. An auto was rumbling down the grade! He'd demand a lift into town—Peanut could amble in, or jog back to the Buckjump, which ever suited his fancy. Tige's gray eyes lightened up with renewed hope—no need to break the heart of his plucky and willing Peanut hoss.

The auto rolled down the grade. Two men were in the front seat, nobody in the tonneau. Praise be—plenty of room. He'd strip saddle and bridle off the pony and turn Peanut loose.

"Hey, hold on there!" Tige spurred Peanut directly across the road. "Give me a lift to town. Pony's plumb give out!"

The man at the wheel, his eyes concealed by enormous horn-rimmed goggles, stared

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at this disheveled, securely roped specimen of the open ranges. So did his golf-capped companion, who tossed an expensive cigarette, half consumed, over the edge of the car.

The driver clamped on the brake, and the pair of them stared at Tige with undisguised curiosity, more or less mixed with suspicion.

"One of you birds help me!" Tige's nerves were worn ragged. His demand was for action and these strangers hailing from more highly civilized parts sat there and inspected him as though he were a side show freak.

"Say, get a move on! Slash these ropes with your knife, will you?" roared Tige resentfully.

"He's an escaped prisoner!" The chap sitting beside the driver spoke nervously. "We'd be arrested if we helped him. Step on the gas, Bert."

"Hey, no you don't!" Tige yelled at them, unwittingly tactless in his desire to be speeding toward his goal. "I wouldn't be boltin' into town like this if I was dodgin' the sheriff, would I?" He stood up in his stirrups, helplessly heaving his shoulders. "Quick, I gotta get to Susanville by two o'clock!"

"Two o'clock?" The youth wearing the smart golf cap consulted his wrist watch. "You ought to make it. Sorry, but we can't afford to take any chances out in this wilderness."

The driver stepped on the gas, the car picked up speed quickly and purred on its way.

That dude said he ought to make it! What 'd those pin-headed nuts think—that a pony was built same's a high-powered auto? Sure, they'd make Susanville in their car by two o'clock, and not break any speed laws at that. But poor, leg-weary, winded Peanut hoss?

Peanut lifted his drooping head, curved his foam-flecked neck in a sidling reach, and nipped at Tige's boots.

He couldn't make the rodeo grounds by two. And supposing his name and number were the first to be drawn out of the hat? Each rider must answer to that summons promptly—that was one of the strictest rules of the rodeo. There was no comeback, once your name was announced and you failed to answer on the spot. You were barred out of the contest.

Didn't seem like he had a chance in the world. Tige shook his head dejectedly, but his spurs touched Peanut's flanks.

"We're beat, Peanut! We've wasted ten good minutes here. We'll never limp into Susanville by two. But don't you go and feel all cut up about it. It ain't your fault, lil old pal."

CHAPTER XX.

TWO O'CLOCK!

WHERE was Tige Northrup? Tige the Terrible, who had pepped up those first two days of the rodeo and sent shivers of delight through the big audiences.

They were shouting his name on that third and last day of the rodeo. His reckless stunts and skillful riding in the preliminaries had prepared the crowds for even more daring exhibitions in the finals.

Grand stand and bleachers had filled up before ten o'clock that morning—the overflow seethed along the boundary lines of the arena, perched upon the top rail of the fence inclosing the race course.

"Tige Northrup! Tige Northrup!" Twice and three times his name had been broadcasted through the announcer's megaphone and no Tige had responded to ride the bawling, ugly bull penned in the bucking chute.

Hoots of disappointment mingled with the bull's maddened protests when the next slip was drawn from the hat and another cowboy scaled the chute fence and dropped upon the writhing back of the bull Tige was to have ridden.

Then rumors began to circulate. Loop Brown and Dummy Norris were paged by the judges. Loop alone reported. Dummy had hopped on his pony and scooted out to the Buckjump. He'd be returning any moment now, for they'd discovered Tige's absence soon as they had awakened, long about seven o'clock that morning.

Hadn't Tige left some sort of message?

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Had he occupied his room that night? He hadn't and he had, to those respective questions. The judges weren't nearly so concerned about Tige's failure to show up at the finals as Loop. He was in a frantic state of suspense which increased with each passing minute.

Added to his worry over Tige's mysterious disappearance was the delayed return of Dummy from his scouting trip to the Buckjump. Had Tige slipped off to see how affairs were going out there? Loop was puzzled—Tige hadn't mentioned the ranch once while he had been in town.

There hadn't been the slightest sound of a struggle at the Cowboy's Corral—Tige certainly hadn't been hauled out of bed by force.

Four times the announcer had called as many names for the bull-riding finals. The contest was nearly ended and no Tige speeding in to clamor for his rightful chance. Loop dogged the heels of Spot Stevens, and Spot had boasted jeeringly that Tige had beat it for the range rather than take a setting against Spot in the bucking contest.

Cowboys from Crumpled Creek, Fall River, Grasshopper, from every range tributary to Susanville, sought out Loop. Many of them had wagered money on Tige's winning in both contests.

"Huh, ain't I shelled up every dollar I got on him," snapped Loop, worriedly watching the last puncher catapult out of the chute on his bull.

Loop cornered Spot Stevens after first money had been awarded to a half-breed from Horse Lake.

"Look here, Spot, where's them hombres, Johnny King and Canny Stokes?

"I don't have to answer that, Loop, but seein' as how yuh're playin' wet nurse to Tige, I'll tell yuh." Spot's backers whooped their joy at this crude jest. "My boys had some work to do out at the Gray Dog. They'll be breezin' in 'bout noon, if that eases yuhr mind any." Spot's thin lips curled in a leering grin.

"I ain't puttin' it past yuh of knowin' more'n yuh lets on about Tige's not bein' here, Spot." Loop glared fiercely at the top rider of the Gray Dog Ranch. "And if yuh does, it's yuh'll be needin' a coupla wet nurses, I'm promisin' yuh that!"

More rumors were set afloat by this snappy little interview between Spot and Loop. The crowd didn't thin out for the noon hour—there was an air of expectancy hovering over the rodeo grounds. No telling what might happen at any moment, and nobody wanted to miss the excitement should Tige the Terrible come galloping in upon the scene.

Shortly after noon a yell brought the packed bleachers and grand stand to their tiptoes. A horseman was seen streaking down the dusty road. He shot through the entrance gate and swirled out into the race course in front of the crowd.

"Dummy Norris!" Cowboys chorused his name.

A groan of disappointment surged from the spectators, but they immediately pricked up their ears. Dummy's news was soon common property—Tige hadn't gone to the Buckjump. Where was he, then? What had happened to the star performer of the rodeo?

Foul play? His rivals had lured him out of town, murdered him, perhaps? All reports were welcomed, and the more gruesome the details, the faster they spread.

Other events were carried out according to the program. A stage coach race and the winner was cheered, principally to give the crowd a chance to voice its pent-up excitement. Half after one and only one more number scheduled before the most thrilling climax of the three-day show.

Loop Brown and Dummy Norris, each at his wits' end, stood apart from the cowboys grouped about the bucking pens. They hadn't given up hope that Tige would come dashing in at the last minute.

They'd searched every bootlegging joint in and about town, but first of all they'd gone to the livery stable and learned that Peanut had been taken out at an early hour and without the knowledge of the stable force. That's why Dummy had split the wind on that snappy round trip to the Buckjump.

"It ain't like Tige," muttered Loop. "I'm stumped, but they's a mean look in Spot Stevens's eye. He's wise to suthin'."

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"Yeah," agreed Dummy. "Only we can't jump him jest on guesswork. It's got my goat, all right."

"Hey, yuh fellers," a cowboy from Crumpled Creek accosted them, "they's a jane over there by the gate what wants to see yuh." A jerk of his thumb indicated the big gate opening into the race course.

"Who is it?" asked Loop, instantly on the alert.

"Search me. Ain't never saw her at the dances even."

Loop and Dummy hurriedly crossed the track.

"Criminies!" A smothered exclamation from Dummy when he recognized the girl huddled against the gate post.

"Oh"—she fluttered toward them, pale blue eyes rolling nervously—"haven't you heard where Tige is? Has something awful happened to him?"

The cowboys shook their heads in doleful unison.

"I—I feel dreadfully, really I do." Dorrie Gruman dabbed at her eyes with a tiny square of colored linen.

"Yuh ain't the only one," groaned Loop mournfully.

"You see, I—I didn't speak to him that first day when you were in the parade. I was mad at him. But oh, I'm so sorry. Please tell him that soon as ever you see him, won't you?" Dorrie's mewing voice trembled. "Wasn't he perfectly wonderful—the way he rode? So fearless and splendid!" Another flick of the small kerchief and she continued. "Have you seen that Willis girl to-day?"

"Nora?" Both Loop and Dummy turned as though moved by the same wire, and scanned the grand stand. Loop was the first to speak.

"Yuh didn't see her out in Willow Crik, did yuh, Dummy?"

"Nope; thought of streakin' up there, too; but him and Nora ain't been speakin' to each other for some time now," said Dummy frankly.

"O-ooh!" A little wail from Dorrie. "And I'm so sorry about that, too. If anything has happened to Tige, I'll never forgive myself, never."

"How come?" demanded Loop, eying her suspiciously. "What yuh know about Tige's not showin' up?"

Dorrie shook her head dramatically. "That's why I want to see Nora Willis. I know I can explain something to her—and oh, I do hope it won't be too late!"

A bell clanged.

"Criminies!" A yowl from Dummy. "Two o'clock—they're callin' the buckin' finals."

"And he ain't in sight," Loop sputtered; and then he raised his voice in a shout: "Lookit, Dummy, there's Mone!"

"And Nora Willis!" A shrill cry from Dorrie Gruman, which was drowned in the booming tones of the man at the megaphone:

"All cowboys who qualified for the final bucking contest get ready!"

The finals called; Mone Flaherty popping up in the flesh at that hectic moment, and after a whole week's absence! If that could happen, surely it was possible that Tige was on the grounds, ready to answer to his name!

Loop and Dummy forgot Dorrie Gruman. Their undivided attention was focused upon Mone Flaherty, who had gone around the corner of the grand stand, her vigorous elbows prodding husky cowpunchers out of her way, using powerful swimming strokes in sweeping aside curious spectators.

She was plowing straight for the judges' stand, Nora Willis tripping along in her wake—the two of them creating a rippling and swelling tide of curiosity.

"Shtop thim finals!" Mone's ringing voice soared above the hubbub.

Loop and Dummy drove through the milling throng, drawn toward Mone by a compelling bond of loyalty. Mone caught sight of them and cried out over the heads of those intervening.

"Don't ye let thim ride widout Tige! He's bin shenaniganned, that's phwat's happened. Where's that Spot Stevens, him that's the spawn uv the divvil!" Mone's voice had a lusty carrying quality. Her words vibrated far and near. The rodeo crowd was getting its money's worth in thrill after thrill.

The judges stood about the door of their

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stand, visibly concerned at this violent interruption. The announcer, standing on the platform above their heads, already held in his hand the first slip of paper drawn from the hat.

He fiddled with his megaphone, for it was ten minutes past two. The arena, on the far side of the race course, had been cleared for the bucking finals.

Unmanageable bronchos were penned within the chutes; cowboys were clustered about in tense attitudes—those who were to participate in this classic of the rodeo were on their tiptoes, ears cocked to catch the first name broadcasted.

"Where's Tige, Mone?" Loop reached her side, shot the question at her breathlessly.

"Where?" Mone didn't soft pedal. "Where's Spot Stevens? It's that blatherskite which 'll be tellin' me! It's him phwat wrote that note!"

"Note? What note?" snapped out Loop nervously.

"The wan he sint to Tige and him braggin' to me he'd done it! A shameful thrick to be playin' on Tige, and a wurse wan he done to me, lockin' me up same's a pig in a shty. Where's Spot Stevens?"

Mone's blue eyes suddenly flared with the blood of battle, her thick hair tumbled over her shoulders in a witch's mane. She rolled one sleeve elbow-high as she heaved past the judges' stand. Shoved aside the guard at the small gate and rolled up her second sleeve as she strode across the race course.

Mone had seen Spot Stevens standing with the buckaroos who had been selected to ride in the finals. Nora Willis stopped to talk to the judges. Loop and Dummy trailed Mone. The guards blocked the small gate and ordered all others to keep back. The man with the megaphone shouted for order. The crowded bleachers and grand stand were watching, as with a single pair of concentrated eyes, Mone Flaherty's actions.

No dillydallying in her charging swoop upon Spot Stevens. Cowboys scattered before her. Spot himself a strange smirk twisting his features, backed up till he was braced against the rails of the nearest bucking pen. An outlawed broncho squealed and kicked within this inclosure.

"It's yersilf, Spot Stevens, which knows where Tige's at! Spake it out befront uv iverybody! Where's Tige?" Mone Flaherty brandished a goodly right fist at the cocky top rider.

He shook his head. "I ain't ridin' herd on Tige Northrup."

"Deny it if ye dares that it was ye and thim other Gray Dog h'athens which locked me up in that shack in the hills?" Mone turned to the cowboys crowding in a circle about her. "He fetched me wurrd Tige was kilt and me fallin' fer thim lies. I wint with him and phwat did he do—trun me up hill and down to lock me in a shack fit fer bats and shnakes and laves me there, b'dad! Where's Tige Northrup, coward that ye are?"

"The woman's crazy!" retorted Spot, striving to make light of these accusations. "I don't know where Tige's at."

"And I'm here to say Mone Flaherty ain't crazy," broke in Loop Brown.

"Out with it, Spot—where's Tige?" Dummy Norris stepped threateningly toward Stevens.

A blast of word shouted through the megaphone goaded Mone into action.

"It's the finals they're callin', is it?" She pounced upon a tall, lanky puncher who had pushed his way to the front rank of circling cowboys. A quick thrust of her vigorous arm and Mone snatched the heavy quirt of braided rawhide dangling from his wrist. She nearly upset the dumfounded buckaroo who "woofed" and stared with all his eyes.

"Arrah, an' take that fer yer lies!" The rawhide whistled through the air, raising a red welt across Spot's jaw. "An' that fer lockin' me in a pig shty!" A second cutting blow. "An' that an' that fer the shenanigan yez played on Tige!"

Again and again the heavy quirt swished and cut, Spot fending the blows as best he could; but Mone Flaherty was no weakling and her wrath was righteous. She broke down his defenses, and Spot sprang away from the fence and ran, Mone lunging after him, flaying him savagely till his nimbler feet carried him beyond her reach.

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"Stop it! Look, look, Mone!" Dummy caught up with the raging woman. "It's Tige! See—he's here!" Dummy pointed excitedly toward the grand stand.

"Tige! Ye're not foolin', Dummy?"

"Can't yuh see him—he's ridin' Peanut! Listen, they're yellin' it through the megaphone!"

Mone shook the tumbled mane free of her battling eyes and stared beyond the low fence separating the race course from the bucking arena. There was no mistaking that figure mounted on the pinto cowpony. The rider loomed above the swarm of humanity streaming and eddying about him. Grand stand and bleachers were a roaring mass, whooping the riotous news:

"It's Old Tiger Stripes himself!"

"Hello, there, Wolf of the World!"

"Tige the Terrible! Wowie! Tige's riding in the finals!"

Mone Flaherty brushed the hair off her brow with an upward thrust of the quirt. "Wud ye look at him, Dummy! Wid his two hands tied behint him! The foine, fightin' spalpeen!" She whirled and, with a burry cry, hurled the quirt at Spot Stevens, who was blinking unbelievably at this victorious return of his bitter rival.

"Tige it is! Thin it's another batin' an' a good wan ye'll be gittin' from Tige himself, ye cowardly shneak!" Mone grabbed Dummy's arm and the pair of them charged after Loop, whose spurs were jingling halfway across the arena in a fast sprint to greet the star rider of the rodeo.

CHAPTER XXI.

"BUTTERIN' THE BUCKJUMP!"

THE mere fact that his arms were bound with ropes, his hands pinioned behind his back, lent a picturesque and dramatic effect to Tige Northrup's entry on a spent and drabbled cowpony.

True, he hadn't arrived at two o'clock—it was half after that hour. Peanut had proved his mettle. Deep-chested, close-coupled, and game to the last beat of his sturdy heart, the pony had plugged over those six miles without faltering or stumbling.

He didn't finish up with a spirited dash, nor was Tige bubbling over with the air of a conquering hero. Peanut limped in before that excited mob and Tige believed that the bucking finals were over with.

The shouts of the spectators and cowboys crashed against his ears in confusing volume. Tige gazed about him, utterly bewildered to know exactly what all the uproar was about. Was everybody hooting at him, jesting at his sorry plight? What had started that rumpus over at the bucking chutes?

A swirling mass of faces surrounded him and Peanut. Arms were reaching for him, he was lifted out of the saddle, supported by eager hands.

Clip! Clip! Some one cutting the ropes. A throbbing, thrilling sensation shot up and down his spine. Cool fingers were chafing his wrists. He was looking down upon a gay little sport hat crushed at a saucy angle over clustering and dusky curls.

"Nora!" He spoke her name huskily, oblivious of everything except that melting, wonderful light in the dark eyes lifted to his face.

"Yes, Tige." She patted his wrists gently, tweaking each separate finger till it tingled warmly. "Oh, Tige, I never was so thrilled in all my life! And you've come just in the nick of time, too."

"I'm not too late?" Tige's head went up, the tired droop vanished from his shoulders. "But it's 'way after two. Peanut did his best, but he ain't a machine."

"Tigey!" The shuffling of many feet and a lane opened in the crowd. "Tigey! Ye ain't hur-rt, me lad?" Mone Flaherty bounced up to him, strapping arms outspread, and the stuttering, astonished cowboy was swept off his feet in a mighty bear's hug.

"Mone! Sufferin' catamounts, but I'm tickled to see you again!" This was something like! Tige's old grin crinkled the corners of his eyes and twitched his lips. A glow shone from the tiger stripes in his gray eyes. Nora making a fuss over him, good old Mone beaming upon him, and he wasn't too late to ride against Spot Stevens!

That dull, heavy weight which had been

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with him for so long, slipped its moorings. The whooping and hurrahing of the mob hadn't done that much for him, neither yesterday nor the day before. It was the light in Nora's dark eyes, the touch of her cooling fingers; and Mone radiating stanch affection, Mone come back to him after that week of mystery and suspense.

"Criminies, Tige—yuh sure had us buffaloed!" Dummy's twanging voice set a-quiver more emotions.

And there was Loop Brown giving him the familiar high sign over the heads of the milling crowd. He'd needed a stiff bracer after that heartbreaking race, and he'd got it in full measure, heaped up and running over, from Nora and Mone, from Loop and Dummy.

A bell clanged. The man behind the megaphone was bellowing announcements.

"All cowboys who qualified for the bucking finals get ready!"

"Shure, an' wasn't Oi afther tellin' thim they'd not be ridin' widout ye, Tige?" Mone stepped back a pace, elbowing the curious to right and left. She scrutinized Tige closely. "Wid that look in yer eye, yez cud win wid yer two hands tied like they was. Bad cess to thim what done it!"

Again the megaphone blared forth a fresh announcement:

"The judges find Spot Stevens guilty of unsportsmanlike conduct. Spot Stevens is barred from the bucking finals!"

A clamorous howl of approval rocked the grand stand and bleachers. The kidnaping of Mone Flaherty and the decoying of Tige had been circulated with amazing swiftness. Spot was jeered and hissed.

"Hold on!" Tige broke away from Mone and Nora, shook off Dummy's restraining hand and signaled the judges. "Don't rule him off! I'm wantin' to ride against Spot Stevens!"

The announcer leaned far over his platform, batting his eyes at this unexpected intervention; then he repeated Tige's ultimatum through the resonant megaphone. Rounds of applause followed, but there was a division of sentiment, yet the crowd clamored for more excitement. If Spot was barred off the field, half the thrills of the contest went aglimmering.

"Gosh, Tige, Spot done his durndest to drag yuh out of it, didn't he?" Dummy barked resentfully.

But Tige scarcely heard Dummy's protest. He was listening to Nora, returning the pressure of her clinging fingers. "Oh, Tige, I'm glad. I could kiss you right here before everybody for that!"

Nora restrained that impulse, but the sparkling approval in her eyes was more than promising.

"Come on, Tige," Dummy tugging at his arm. "Yuh've got to mosey over to the pens. We can't hold up the show no longer. Loop's takin' care of Peanut."

"Tige, Mone and I'll bring you some hot coffee. I suppose you're starved, but you shouldn't eat a thing till after the finals." Mone elbowed a lane through the crowd and Nora went with her to the refreshment booth.

Dummy was piloting Tige through the gate and on to the benches reserved for the cowboys who were to try for that big money prize. The judges were debating whether or not Spot was to be reinstated. Tige's eyes narrowed when he saw Spot talking to Johnny King and Canny Stokes, the three of them standing apart from the other buckaroos. The mere sight of his rival caused his jaws to clench and his fists to double.

Dummy had given him a breezy account of Mone's thrashing him. And there stood Spot, marked with the welts of the quirt, yet facing the crowd with cocky assurance. He didn't know whether the judges were to toss his name back into the hat or not; but he wasn't throwing a fit about it.

Tige guessed what he'd say if they didn't give him a chance—brag that he'd have won the contest, that Tige never could or never would ride as good as he did.

That was Spot Stevens—a rival who refused to admit defeat. The nerve of a brass monkey. Tige sat down on the bench in the lee of the bucking pens. Loop was crossing the arena with Mone and Nora—Mone carefully guarding a covered pail, Nora dangling a tin cup from her fingers. And there was Scow Peterson's pink face peering over Mone's broad shoulder!

"Tige, the judges decided you're to ride

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last, even if your name is drawn ahead of the others." Nora looked him over anxiously. "That will give you time to rest up and here's the hot coffee."

"How about Spot—they lettin' him ride?" Tige took the cup of steaming coffee which Nora handed him.

"They wouldn't tell me," Nora cast a smoldering eye toward Spot, who had the audacity to smirk at her. "We won't make you nervous, Tige, staying with you till it's your turn to ride?"

"Gee, no, Nora. That coffee hits the spot. I'm ga'nt same's a starved wolf. Nothin' to eat since last night."

"You poor man!" Nora managed to monopolize his undivided attention while Loop and Dummy regaled Scow with a picturesque and detailed version of Mone's horsewhipping of Stevens.

"You know, Tige, everybody's for you in these finals. Oh," she paused while the megaphone artist heralded the name of the first cowboy and the number of the outlaw he had drawn for his mount. "Just you ride half as well as you did yesterday and they'll simply have to give you first prize, Tige."

She reached for his hands and bent her head over the rope-bruised wrists. None of the cowboys were observing them; they were all too interested in watching the frenzied bucking of the first broncho out of the chutes.

"Dorrie Gruman's not the only one who thinks you're fearless and splendid, Tige."

"What's that?" Tige's fingers closed over her hand tightly. Surely Nora wasn't joshing him?

"Do you know, Tige, I'm going to 'fess up to, er—well, some terribly wicked things." She patted the swollen wrists.

"Y-you couldn't do anything wicked, Nora." Tige was remembering that wonderful light in her dusky eyes which he had discovered right after she had cut the ropes off his wrists.

"It was wicked for me to keep quiet as a mouse in your kitchen and listen to what you and Dorrie had to say to each other. That day I cooked dinner for you boys—you know?" A tinge of crimson flooded his girl's cheeks.

"What'd you hear?" demanded Tige gruffly.

"About everything, I guess. But the most important was about your not writing that note inviting Dorrie to the barn dance."

"It was true," said Tige decisively.

"And there was that about this other girl you've always been crazy about." An upward flick of her lashes revealed a twinkling gleam.

"You didn't have to hide in the kitchen to find that out. I've told you regularlike, the same thing, ever since I first met up with you, Nora."

"I—I believe this other, girl, meaning me, Tige, sort of loves to hear you say it, too," demurely from Nora.

"You don't always act like it," declared Tige.

"And, Tige, you know that it was Spot who wrote that note to Dorrie, don't you?"

"I guessed as much."

"Spot's too clever with his pencil. He wrote that message you thought was from Mone. Has she told you about it?"

"No. He's a crook and a forger." Tige flashed a threatening look at Spot as he fished the crumpled note from his pocket. "I'd 'a' sworn Mone wrote it herself." Nora examined the penciled scrawl and wagged her head severely.

"If it hadn't been so tragic, I would have laughed at Mone flouncing into our house just at noon. She'd run all the way over the hill from that cabin. Mercy, how she did fume and rage!

"Lucky I had the horse hitched to the buggy, and was all ready to come in or Mone might not have got here in time to stop the finals.

"Seems that Spot offered her twice as much money if she'd cook for the Gray Dogs. She refused and that's why he kept her locked up. Then he threatened to write this note." Nora tapped her fingers with the folded slip.

"He gave her another chance to change her mind, and she wouldn't. So he swore he'd send you this message and throw you into that cabin with her." Nora giggled. "Wouldn't I have liked to see her digging through that big chimney! She poured out

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a harrowing tale of how she tore a hole in the chimney and nearly got stuck in the hole."

"I crawled through the same hole," affirmed Tige. "Spot slipped up on that dirty trick. But I'd never 'a' dragged in on time if it hadn't been for bully lil old Peanut hoss." Tige breathed deeply.

Another name had been drawn from the hat. Thad Rimble from Grasshopper was the second cowboy summoned to ride.

"Wonder if they're lettin' Spot come in?" Tige was fidgeting on the bench. He drained the cup of its last drop of coffee.

"One word from you and they won't," said Nora, her dark eyes studying the set jaw and frowning brows of Tige.

"I want him to ride, Nora. I'm off this sort of stuff for keeps, only it ought to be a show-down between Spot and me this time." Tige spoke to the girl, but his gray eyes were following the buckaroo forking that fighting outlaw.

He was seeing things in a clearer, bigger light since that dash down Snowshoe Cañon. He knew, now, that his main motive in risking his own life, and that of Peanut, was merely to gain a victory over Spot Stevens and he had kidded himself into thinking it was to win that five hundred dollars in order to make good on his lease.

"You mean you won't ride in the rodeos any more, Tige?"

"Yeah. I'm through playin' up to the grand stand and all that bunk. Where does it get a guy? That's why old Bangs, over at the bank, wouldn't advance me a loan—he had me sized up for just what I was—a talk-big and do-nothin' buckaroo."

"But Tige, you've been splendid, the way you went after that lease, and landed it."

"You're way off, Nora. I wouldn't have cinched it if—er—well, I see now it was just a fool notion of Dorrie Gruman's which swung that deal and not my convincin' talk to the widow. I was a boob not to see through that right off—"

"No, Tige, not that. I understand it now. It was because you don't go about thinking every girl who smiles at you is in love with you, like so many men do. And if you weren't a pretty fine sort of a man, you would have played up to Dorrie's infatuation and, well, married the Buckjump, same's everybody thought you would." Nora's voice was tremulously low and earnest.

"I couldn't do that, Nora, not when I was crazy in love with you all the time."

"Was?" Nora's fingers caressed his wrists.

"Was and am and always will be, far's I can figger out such things, Nora."

"Tige, it wasn't decent of me to go on teasing you and flirting with Spot on the side. But with you, it has always been because I cared. You do believe that, don't you, Tige?"

Tige forgot the bucking finals. This wonderful moment was much more precious than that of the stolen kiss in the Buckjump kitchen. "Nora, believin' that is better than ropin' the biggest prize in the whole world. Makin' good on the old Buckjump wouldn't have spelled much if I'd lost you. It was to make a hit with you that I went after that lease."

"Um—supposing I say you have roped me, but, Tige, sometimes a frisky colt will slip out of the noose if the roper gets careless. Tell me," and here Nora, who was a rancher's daughter, gave voice to her practical side, "how are you going to make the Buckjump pay?"

Tige jerked to his feet. The Grasshopper puncher had been thrown and another announcement echoed from the megaphone. Had the judges decided for or against Spot's riding.

"Love Wheelan," rang out the spieler's resonant voice. "Drawing Spinning Top for his mount!"

"Love'll have some tussle with that ornery nag," breathed Tige, sitting on the edge of the bench. "If Spot's out of it, I'm the next victim."

"You're not nervous, Tige?" inquired Nora, her own suspense difficult to curb.

"Some," admitted Tige. "Well, look who's here! Scow Peterson, grinnin' his ears loose at me. Hello, Scow! How's everything out at the Buckjump?"

"Gude enough," drawled Scow. "Dat stage not come for the cream, so Ay brang

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it in to-day, Tige. Here bane a check Ay get for dem two big loads." Scow produced a sealed envelope and handed it to Tige.

Tige thumbed open the flap and fished out the narrow slip of blue paper.

"Sufferin' catamounts!" A low whistle of amazement tapered off this gusty exclamation. He raised his eyes, staring at the grinning Peterson.

"Scow, Bije Grimes was right—lookit!" He held the check before the Swede's face and pointed to the perforated figures.

"Ay bet you she's gude, hey, Tige!" The smile creased the pink face from ear to ear.

"Good! Lookit, Nora, what do you think of that?" He passed the check over to the girl.

"Oh, why, Tige Northrup! And they poked fun at you for starting a dairy on the Buckjump," cried Nora delightedly.

"Yeah—called it butterin' the Buckjump and me a cute lil dairy maid, bah!"

Nora clapped her hands enthusiastically. "Just you go right on buttering the Buckjump to that tune, Tige!" She gave him back the check.

Tige read off the amount. "Let's see, that's for some less than a month's milking, isn't it, Scow?"

"Three weeks," admitted Scow. "Purty soon, dem cows dey give more. Vait, Ay tell Mone. Maybe now she be glad Ay name dat Maggie cow back to Mone, hey?"

"Butterin' the Buckjump!" Tige leaned against the rails of the chute. "Listen, Nora—I've been a ornery fraid-cat, shyin' off from boostin' that string of dairy cows. I knowed they was big money in 'em, too. But it was like Bije Grimes allowed—I was pig-headed and stiff-necked, thinkin' it was as low-down as raisin' sheep to milk a string of cows.

"I knowed I'd get joshed, same's they have kidded me. I wanted to wade into the cattle-raisin' business with both feet. That listened big and fine. Didn't want to turn the Buckjump into a darned dairy ranch, but—" Tige paused, his attention wandering to the pitching broncho churning the puncher glued to his back.

"Yes, Tige, go on," urged Nora.

"Seems like I'm seein' things clearer now, Nora. Here's the answer to your question," he waved the check before her sparkling eyes. "That's how I'm goin' to make the Buckjump pay! Off the dairy cows. My share of cattle and crops'll be clear profit. Bije Grimes knew what he was talkin' about, all right, and I'm for that dairy, well," and here Tige grinned boyishly, "with one foot, anyhow!"

"Oh, and even if you don't win this bucking contest, which you will, you can hire your hay crew! Isn't that splendid, Tige?"

"Sure, and right off the bat I'm buyin back lil old Peanut hoss."

"Buying back Peanut?" Nora's question went unanswered for the time being, for Love Wheelan had completed his ride and Tige was on his tiptoes, listening to the man at the megaphone who waxed dramatic in this important announcement:

"The next man to ride is—Spot Stevens!"

A roar of applause rattled the flimsily constructed bleachers and grand stand. They weren't to be cheated of their full measure of thrills. The two deadly rivals were to be pitted against each other, after all.

Tige felt Nora's eyes fixed upon him. He looked into her upturned, anxious face. She was speaking softly, urgently: "Tige, old dear, you simply can't let Spot win!"

"With you backin' me! Gee, Nora—" Their hands were gripped in a close pressure while cowboys clustered about the chute wherein the outlaw falling to the lot of Spot Stevens was kicking and bawling.

Spot, his hard blue eyes glittering audaciously, swaggered past and jauntily clambered up the rails of the chute. There was no questioning the fact that he was a formidable rival. He'd won first money in previous rodeos; so had Tige.

But Spot was handicapped by the sentiment of the crowd. It was overwhelmingly against him. He'd been publicly horsewhipped by a woman, and he had attempted to keep Tige out of the finals by trickery.

Cat calls and whoops of derision greeted him and small knots showed at the points of his desperately clenched jaws—the only sign that he was rattled. There wasn't an-

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other cowboy in the country who could have gone through with that panicky ordeal—but Spot Stevens, though he was crooked and hard-boiled, was no quitter.

He dropped from the top rail of the chute into the saddle. The gate swung open and the frenzied broncho shot out into the arena, a demon gone mad.

The shrieks of derision died away. Spot was riding pretty, topping that plunging, fighting outlaw with insolent skill, fanning the beast with waving sombrero, scratching it from shoulder to hip. There certainly wasn't the sign of a yellow streak in Spot when it came to conquering a man-killing broncho.

"Seems like nobody could ride better," muttered Tige, when the report of the pistol denoted that Spot had bested his mount.

"Not even when somebody's loving you?" Nora's dark eyes were misty with emotion. "And that somebody's—me—Tige?"

"Nora—" Tige didn't have an opportunity to say more.

Loop, Dummy, Scow, and Mone Flaherty were flocking about him. His name was booming through the dust-filled air of the arena.

They couldn't roar loud enough, though, to drown out Nora's whispered words. If the whole world had been against him, and Nora still loved him, he'd win just to please his splendid little girl.

He realized that he was nothing more than a daring, hot-headed buckaroo to that rabble. Nora knew different, now. Of course, she wanted him to beat Spot Stevens, she wanted him to win that money prize and the reputation which went with it, the bulliest best buckaroo in the valley.

But more than that—Nora was backing him for lots more than that. She'd slip through his noose, same's that frisky colt, if he didn't fight for a bigger and sounder reputation than buckarooing.

Tige strode away from his small group of loyal friends. He personally saw to it that the saddle was properly adjusted on his outlaw, the cinch tightened to the last notch. He couldn't afford to be careless. Then he scaled the fence and lowered himself into the saddle.

"Ho, Tige!" A jeering taunt from Spot Stevens. "I'm still on that thar job of keepin' yuh in hell!"

Cowboys pulled open the gate and the hammer-headed horse dove out, forefeet striking the dust of the arena in a stiff-legged lunge.

Tige yi-yipped, the yell coming from deep in his chest. He scarcely heard the roaring cheers of the crowd. Every ounce of his energy was concentrated upon this smashing, fighting test of man against horse. He'd always been a fiend for the sport, the wilder the outlaw, the harder he rode.

Tige, on the back of a careening broncho, was all buckaroo. There was dash and deviltry in his performance because he was not playing to the grand stand, but tending strictly to the business of riding. His lusty yi-yips were challenging battle cries. It was Tige's primitive self which possessed him in this ride; the other self had been knocked into oblivion at the first jump of the outlaw.

"Tige! Tige!" Dummy shouting at him; Dummy riding herd on him and crowding the sun-fishing outlaw into a far corner of the arena.

"Climb on behind me!" Dummy commanding him, as he had done often before when Tige entered these broncho-busting stunts.

Tige kicked his toes free of the stirrups and swung from the still plunging outlaw to the back of Dummy's pony. It was not till then that Tige realized that his ride was finished. Had he gone groggy? He didn't remember hearing the pistol shot. How had he ridden?

The hubbub was deafening. Dummy was mumbling something, but Tige couldn't understand what he was saying. They dashed up to the bucking pens. Cowboys surged about them and snatched Tige off the horse.

His gray eyes swept over their heads and, shaking off the clamorous throng Tige forged through the buzzing ranks of punchers and made straight for Nora Willis. She was standing upon the bench where they had sat a few moments ago.

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Tige didn't speak, just looked at Nora.

Her lips moved and Tige couldn't catch the words—they were lost in the booming chorus of five thousand tongues.

"Nora—"

She laid a finger on his lips. "Hush, Tige!" She took hold of his shoulders and turned him about to face the cheering crowds. The announcer brandished his megaphone and succeeded in quelling the uproar sufficiently to proclaim:

"Tige Northrup wins the bucking finals! First prize goes to Tige Northrup!"

"Nora!" Tige lifted the girl down from the bench. "I'm glad; but that first prize wouldn't mean nothin' a-tall if I'd lost out with you. I'm remembering what you said about me ownin' a corral of my own. That's what I'm out after now, Nora."

In another moment they would be surrounded by insistent and congratulating swarms. Nora gave Tige's hand a quick little squeeze. "Tige, old dear, you *are* splendid and fearless!"

"What's that?" He held her sparkling, upward gaze in a compelling challenge.

"I don't care if Dorrie did say it first, it's true. And I admire her taste in picking out her one and only beau; but she can't have you, Tige. I'm your first prize, and you're mine, and we're going to own that corral between us!"

"We sure will, Nora," declared Tige, the glow of victory shining from his tiger-striped eyes. And that's all he had a chance to say just then, for Nora had to temporarily share her first prize with his host of admiring friends.

THE END

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CHOICE

FOR the sailor man the salt of the sea,
The salt of the sea and the white of the spray
And a bellying sail at close of day,
The clamor and roar of an engine room
The glare of the deck and the bunker's gloom,
And a ship that is all that a ship should be
For a sailor man—but not for me.

The crest of a wave for a sailor man,
And a chart and a compass his only guide,
But the sea is deep and the sea is wide,
And there are graves that have never seen
A rose love-planted, a bit of green,
And the lost are a mighty caravan,
For the sea gods laugh at the might of man.

But for mine the sweep of the prairie land,
And for mine the blue of a prairie sky,
The kiss of the wind as it rushes by,
In the winter snow, and in summer sun,
And the bunk house gang when the day is done,
A well worn saddle, a rope in my hand;
For these are the joys I can understand.

L. Mitchell Thornton.

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The Publicity Princess

By A. T. LOCKE

PERHAPS you never heard of Lotus Blossom, the reincarnation of the beautiful Princess Azamaranth of ancient Egypt, and then again you may remember her name.

A great many people did hear of her and, in these specious times, she might be making a million dollars a year as a screen star if she had not been bitten, in a way, by a tiny stone scarab, an Egyptian beetle, set in a ring that Ben Milliken wore for awhile under the misapprehension that it would bring him good luck.

Ben Milliken was the publicity director for the old H. and K. Film Corporation and, in his own profession, he was somewhat of a genius. Because of his ingenuity and originality he was, in fact, more than publicity director for the concern. He actually was the right hand man of Hyman & Klipstein and the two partners, who had abandoned the cloak and suit business in favor of the picture industry, consulted him on many details of their affairs that were in no way related to spreading glad tidings regarding forthcoming productions.

While Ben was bombarding the trade papers with erudite interviews purporting to come from Mr. Hyman or Mr. Klipstein, interviews couched in language that neither of them could understand, he also was recommending stories for production, cutting and assembling film, suggesting players who might be cast in various rôles, and taking an occasional whack at revamping scenarios which had been prepared by less talented writers than himself.

I know all about Ben because I was his incompetent assistant and I occupied an office with him in the H. and K. studios at Fort Lee, back in the days before Hollywood was on the picture map.

"I see," he said one morning when he dropped into our sanctum, "that Mr. Hyman has a new stenographer."

"Well," I replied, "there's no news in that. If he didn't have a new one, that would be—"

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Mr. Hyman was a fiery little fellow who never hesitated to air his opinions of dumb Doras and, as a result, he seldom ever kept a secretary more than a month. They usually floated out on a flood of tears after they had tried for two or three weeks to put up with his chronic indigestion.

Ben didn't make any reply to me, but just sat down at his desk and started to fumble around with some papers in an aimless sort of way. I took one look at him and I had a hunch, right then and there, that something was disturbing him.

"What's her name?" I asked.

"Miss Bodkin," he told me. "Sarah Bodkin."

Right then I knew that Ben had been struck by love because he never had paid any attention, as far as I had seen, to any of the stenographers who littered up the place.

"H-m-m-m," I continued, "is she a good looker?"

"Well," Ben sighed, "*you* might not think so. She's not exactly pretty, of course," he added, "but there's something about her." He paused a moment. "She's not the type you'd expect a stenographer to be. She's—"

"Sure," I replied, "I know. Well, she won't stay here long, that's one consolation," I added maliciously. "When Mr. Hyman starts to shoot some of his reverse English in her direction, she'll—"

"Mr. Hyman wouldn't have the nerve," interrupted Ben. "He wouldn't talk to a lady like he has talked to these pot-hookers he has had before."

Then he drifted out of the office and I knew that he had gone down to consult Mr. Hyman on something touching on and appertaining to the affairs of the H. and K. Film Corporation.

Later in the day, being rather desirous of getting a close-up of Sarah Bodkin, I went to Mr. Hyman's office to ask him if, in his opinion, the motion picture was all arts in one art and, if in his opinion it was, would he have any objection to being quoted to that effect in the daily prints.

Mr. Hyman, responding to many leading questions, expressed the belief that the motion picture was a composite of painting, sculpture, drama, prose, poetry, æsthetic dancing and music. It was, in the opinion of Mr. Hyman, not only greater than any one of the old arts, but greater than all of them together. And he did not have the slightest objection to being quoted to the effect that H. and K. productions provided a perfect comfirmation of his belief.

While Mr. Hyman was talking I was stealing a few glances at Sarah Bodkin.

Ben had told me that she was not exactly pretty, but that is exactly what she was. Her hair was jet black and abundant, and it was piled rather carelessly and caressingly on top of her shapely head.

Her olive-complexioned face was enchantingly oval, her lips were tiny, and her features were regular with the exception of her eyes. They were dark, of course, and they had an almost imperceptible slant which gave an alluring Oriental aspect to her countenance.

She was an adept at make-up, too. Just a touch of mascara on her long lashes, a discreet application of rouge, nails that were delicately pink and well-kept hands that were slender and white.

A little barbaric touch was added to her prettiness by her cheap, but becoming jewelry, which consisted of small ear-rings, a couple of bracelets, and a coral necklace.

She rose, to bring a letter she had just finished over to Mr. Hyman and I saw that she was slender and graceful. She stood close to me while her employer, with a frown on his face, was looking over her work.

"Hey!" exclaimed Mr. Hyman. "Even don't you know how to spell. Rejected, young woman, ought to be spelled r-e-j-e-k-t-e-d." He turned to me with a laugh. "She spells it," he said, "r-e-j-e-c-t-e-d. And look," he added. "She spells fillum f-i-l-l-u-m."

She looked at me rather appealingly.

"She spelled rejected right," I explained to Mr. Hyman, and then added diplomatically: "At least, according to common usage. Your spelling of the word is phonetic but that system has not been generally adopted yet."

"So," said Mr. Hyman, "that's all right, then."

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"But I spelled fillum the way you pronounced it, Mr. Hyman," the girl protested. "I thought it was right."

"Well, you wasn't," replied Mr. Hyman. "It's f-i-l-m, *fillum!*"

I left in the middle of the spelling-bee because, after all, I had had my close-up of Sarah and that was what I had gone to the office for.

I found Ben in our sanctum, sitting at his desk with his chin in his hands, looking dreamily at the barren plaster wall in front of him.

"Well," I announced, "I've just seen the divine Sadie."

"The divine Sadie?" he questioned dumbly.

"Yes," I told him, "the divine Sadie. Sarah Bodkin—Miss Bodkin—Mr. Hyman's new secretary."

Ben came to life and appeared to be very much interested.

"She's nice, isn't she?" he suggested.

"So-so," I admitted, with a careless shrug of my shoulders. "There are lots more like her in New York, though. I bet when she goes home at night, it's to some Bronx apartment where the old folks are about four hundred years behind her."

"Well, what of it?" he countered defensively. "That doesn't make her any less wonderful, does it?"

"It couldn't, as far as I'm concerned," I told him.

"I was just sitting here thinking about her," Ben said with a dreamy expression on his face. "Just consider her romantic ancestry," he continued. "Her blood is the blood of Egypt, of Phœnicia, or ancient Araby. Her ancestors were living in golden civilization when our progenitors were prowling through Europe like wild beasts."

Ben had a faint idea of history despite the fact that the celebrated "Outline" was still to be given to the world.

"She may even be a throw-back," he went on, "to some girl who really lived by the Mediterranean in bygone days. Such things happen, you know."

"What makes you think I know?" I asked. "As a matter of fact I don't know any such thing."

"If you'd read a little biology you wouldn't be so ignorant," he advised me indignantly.

"I'll do that," I told him, "after I tell the world that Mr. Hyman believes that the motion picture is all arts in one art. Maybe," I suggested as an afterthought, "that Mr. Hyman is a throw-back, too. Such things happen, you know."

With that I left the sanctum hastily because, after all, love at first sight is too sacred a thing to snicker at.

II.

THE advent of Sadie, as I persisted in calling her much to the disapproval of Ben, upset the men attached to the studio in much the same way that a well-directed bowling-ball upsets the pins in an alley.

Johnny Hazleton, the scenario writer, confessed that the new jane made it almost impossible for him to think in logical sequences and "Red" Phelan, the camera man, started to crank his machine backward one day when Sadie happened to come in on the set.

Augustus Q. Roberts, the leading male star of the H. and K. outfit, bought himself a new wig and Merry Merriwell, who was being featured in stellar rôles, became very apparently jealous of a mere stenographer.

But, despite all the distant adulation she received, Sadie Bodkin rather held herself aloof from the rest of us at the studio.

I figured to myself that Sadie was a cautious girl and that, if she had any intentions toward men, matrimonial or otherwise, she was looking for the one best bet before committing herself. That let me out, so I was content to stand on the sidelines in a watchful-waiting attitude.

Effie Elkins, who was Mr. Klipstein's secretary, managed to get acquainted with Sadie and the two of them, for awhile, used to have lunch together in the restaurant that was run in connection with the studio. Effie was a good-natured kid and she could chatter about inconsequential things by the hour and I noticed that, when the two girls were eating together, it was Effie who did all the talking.

"Miss Bodkin seems to be a nice girl," Effie complained to me one day, "but hon-

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estly—" She paused a moment. "You know," she continued, "I don't like to knock any one, but I don't really think that Sarah ever had an idea in her life. I talk to her until I'm blue in the face and she never says a word."

"Maybe you never give her a chance to say a word," I argued.

"Of course I do," replied Effie, "but if you ask me, her mind's a perfect blank. But then, I suppose," she added charitably, "I suppose the poor kid never had many opportunities at that."

"Maybe she's just dumb," I suggested.

"Maybe," conceded Effie, "but I don't think any one could be born as dumb as she seems to be and still survive. She's like a phonograph record with nothing on it."

Ben spent more time than ever in Mr. Hyman's office, apparently discussing the affairs of the H. and K. Film Corporation with the boss but, in reality, looking with soulful and pleading eyes at Sadie. I dropped into Mr. Hyman's ornate den myself, once in awhile, and had no trouble in deducing the fact that Sadie was a better looker than she was a stenographer.

She and Mr. Hyman usually were arguing over spelling and neither of them, as a rule, was right. I walked in one day and saw Sadie wiping the tears from her dark eyes with a wisp of handkerchief while Mr. Hyman was glaring at her with rather a helpless expression on his face.

"My Gawd!" he exclaimed, waving a letter at me. "I tell her a thousand times that the way to spell story is s-t-o-r-i-e, and she spells it always s-t-o-r-e-y. What'cha goin' to do, I ask? What'cha goin' to do?"

"It won't be long now," I told Ben when I got back to the sanctum.

"What won't be long?" he asked.

"Sadie—Miss Bodkin—won't belong to the stenographic staff of the well known H. & K. Film Corporation," I asserted with a grin. "She and Mr. Hyman just can't agree on how words shouldn't be spelled."

"Oh, that's all right," replied Ben.

"All right!" I exclaimed. "I thought that you were crazy about Sadie."

"I am," he admitted. "She's a wonderful girl. I'm glad that she won't have to grind away at a typewriter much longer."

"Congratulations," I said, reaching for Ben's hand and, at the same time, trying to figure out where and when the courtship had flourished.

"Oh, it's not that—not yet," Ben told me. "But I had Red Phelan make a screen test of Miss Bodkin to-day, and, if I'm not all wrong, there's a treat in store for people who like the movies."

Then he got enthusiastic.

"She has talent, that girl has," he continued, "and I'm going to see that she gets an opportunity to use it. If I once get her to acting, she'll send a lot of these hams right back to the smoke house."

I saw the test the next morning, and, there was no doubt about it, Sadie photographed beautifully. She appeared to much better advantage on the screen than she did at her typewriter, where she usually was registering dismay and bewilderment while she was trying to figure out the meaning of a meaningless jumble of pot-hooks or the proper spelling of some long two syllable word.

Ben was jubilant, and he went to Mr. Hyman and asked him to come into the projection room. Mr. Hyman was not aware of the fact that a test of Sadie had been taken, and, when she suddenly appeared on the screen before him, he opened his mouth as if he was all ready to start an argument over spelling.

"There's a discovery for you—right out of your own office," Ben whispered impressively. "Isn't she a knockout, Mr. Hyman?"

"H-m-m-m-m," said Mr. Hyman in a noncommittal manner.

"And she's a new type to the screen, too, Mr. Hyman," Ben urged. "The people are tired of seeing blond, baby-faced ingénues."

"H-m-m-m-m," said Mr. Hyman.

"She's a good bet, Mr. Hyman," Ben persisted. "Feature her in a production and—"

"Feature her!" exclaimed Mr. Hyman. "Say, do you think I'm crazy, yet. Nobody ever heard of her but me, and I wish I never had."

"I didn't mean feature her," Ben lied easily. "I meant, of course, to give her a

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small part at first and then, if she makes good, give her a chance at a lead. I tell you, Mr. Hyman, she's a find!"

"Well, Bennie," said Mr. Hyman, "use your judgment about that. Maybe it is that you are right."

"We'll give her a part in 'The Fatal Spell' then," said Ben. "I'll get Hazleton to write in a part for her."

"You should change the title to 'The Fatal Speller' and give it to her the lead," said Mr. Hyman dryly.

Ben laughed heartily, because he had gained his point, and that was all he was looking for at that time.

The next day Ben and Sadie had lunch together at a table for two in the restaurant, and they certainly appeared to be interested in each other. I was sitting with Johnny Hazleton, Billy MacDougall, and Effie Elkins and we all, out of the corners of our eyes, watched the tête-à-tête.

"Look at her!" whispered Effie. "She's actually talking. She's talking at length. I'd give anything if I could listen in on the conversation."

"No wonder she's livening up," commented Billy. "She thinks she's going to become a star overnight."

"I wish Ben never had laid eyes on her," groaned Hazleton. "The script for 'The Fatal Spell' is almost finished, and now, just to favor Ben, I've got to tear it apart and put in a rôle for Sadie. Well, Ben has got me a lot of publicity, and I'll do what I can to accommodate him."

According to Ben, when I met him later in our sanctum, a sort of a macadamized road to happiness, without ruts or detours, was stretching out before him.

"We've got it all set, Sarah and I," he told me enthusiastically. "I'm a lucky man, kid. Sarah is there with the appearance and the talent and I'll be there, when the time comes, with the publicity. I'll even do her stories when the company starts to star her. We're going to work together, Sarah and I," he said happily, "and when we both get across in a big way—"

"Then," I finished for him, "let the wild wedding bells ring out."

"That's what I hope," he admitted, "and I think that she feels the same way."

"Atta boy, Ben!" I exclaimed, slapping him on the shoulder. "I hope you have the best of luck."

I really wanted to tell him that I thought he was a dreaming damn fool and that he ought to wake up. But I didn't want to play the rôle of an alarm clock, because most people don't like alarm clocks any better than I do.

And, anyway, they say that it is dangerous to awaken a man who is walking in his sleep along the edge of a precipice.

III.

"THE Fatal Spell" was one of those thrillers that were laid somewhere in the East, and Sadie played the rôle of an Oriental dancing girl. I forget just what part of that extensive territory, the East, the story was supposed to take place in. It was Abyssinia or Armenia or some one of those countries where, according to returning travelers, women don't wear any more clothes than a modern Broadway flapper.

Maybe it was Egypt. I remember that there was desert in the picture, and that we had to go 'way over to Staten Island to get a suitable location for the scenes that took place on what Hazleton, in the scenario, described as "a limitless expanse of rolling dunes."

I remember that Sadie, at first, seemed to be a little bit abashed at the scantiness of her Oriental costume. Girls wore petticoats—you just knew they wore 'em—back in those days, and most of them didn't feel quite at home, in the daytime, without them on.

But after Sadie had wandered around for a couple of days in Don Johnson's conception of the attire of a dancing girl, she seemed to be perfectly at ease.

Johnson was directing the picture, and, at first, he had not taken kindly to having Sadie foisted on him. But when he began to look over the "takes" he was somewhat surprised. For, when Sadie was on the screen, she sort of took your attention away from the rest of the cast.

She had youth and grace and an Oriental aspect that made her ideal for the part she

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was playing. You did not feel, in fact, that you were watching some one act. You were seeing, right before your eyes, an Oriental dancing girl.

For Sadie, I believe, was at that time entirely devoid of imagination. She lacked the slightest conception of what acting meant, and, for that reason, she did not ruin her effectiveness by overacting.

She didn't try to live the part of a dancing girl because she didn't know anything about them. She did her stuff as Johnson told her to do it, and, like a good little dumb-bell, went through it naturally and without any affectation.

"Johnson is tickled to death with her work," Billy MacDougall, his assistant, told me. "The old boy thinks she is a real find."

Ben Milliken, those days, was walking around with a triumphant didn't-I-tell-you-so expression on his face.

"I knew the minute I lamped Sarah that she was a genius," he told me. "Look at the work she is doing in that little part we fixed up for her. Wait until she gets a real chance!"

"Having nothing else to do," I said, "I'll stick around and wait a little while."

"Even Mr. Hyman admits that she's a wonder," added Ben, as if that settled the whole proposition.

"I bet he spells it w-u-n-d-e-r," I snickered.

"You don't seem convinced yet," Ben came back, a little snappish. "No fooling, kid, you're seeing the beginning of a new star. It's a serious matter."

And it seemed to be a serious matter—to Ben, at least.

Every noon he and Sadie had lunch together in the restaurant and, instead of eating, they spent most of their time talking.

"We're discussing the details of a story I am writing for her," Ben explained to me. "She will make such a hit in 'The Fatal Spell' that I won't have any trouble in persuading Mr. Hyman to feature her in a production."

"What kind of a story are you doping out for her?" I inquired.

"I've got an idea," he told me, "that really is more than an ordinary idea. It's nothing less than an inspiration. I'm going to do a story for her in which she will play the part of an old Egyptian princess."

"But," I objected, "she's too young to play the part of an old woman. And, besides, I never heard tell of a princess getting old. When a princess gets along in years she gets promoted and becomes a duchess or a queen or something like that."

"Ah, cut the kidding," said Ben. "I mean a young princess in old Egypt. There has never been a picture of that kind made, and it ought to be the best kind of box office stuff."

"Well?" I questioned.

"Can you imagine Sarah in a rôle of that sort?" he asked enthusiastically. "How she could put it across! The bit she is doing in 'The Fatal Spell' proves that. Why, this new idea of mine could be shaped into one of the greatest productions ever made!"

"It's a new idea, all right," I conceded, "and I guess that maybe Sadie could turn the trick. What does Mr. Hyman think of it?"

"I haven't put it up to him yet," Ben confessed. "I want to see what happens when 'The Fatal Spell' is released. And then, too, I want to dope out a good publicity campaign for the Egyptian picture. I want to show Mr. Hyman how we can get a lot of sensational advertising out of such a feature. I want to think up some stunt that will make Sarah the most-talked-of girl in the country."

"They'll talk about her in the country," I told him, "when they see her dressed in nothing but mosquito netting in 'The Fatal Spell.' They'll even talk about her in the city."

"Well, laugh if you want to," said Ben cheerfully. "You'll admit some day, though, that I know what I'm talking about."

The next noon in the restaurant Ben called me over to the table where he and Sadie were sitting.

"Sit down and join us," he said. "You know I'm working on a feature story for Sarah, and maybe you can help me out. You see—" he went on, but Sadie cut him short:

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"What's that funny ring on your little finger, Ben?" she asked. "I never noticed it before."

"That?" he replied, folding up his digits and extending his hand so that she could see the stone. "I found it in the street one day," he continued. "It's an imitation of an Egyptian scarab. The old Egyptians worshiped scarabs," he explained, "and copied them in stone for decorative purposes."

Sadie, of course, didn't know whether scarabs were a breakfast food or a skin disease, so she sat there and looked beautifully dumb.

"A scarab was an Egyptian beetle," Ben told her, "and it was venerated because it was supposed to bring good luck. Like a cricket, you know."

"Oh," breathed Sadie, looking as though she didn't know anything at all.

Ben slipped the ring from his finger and extended it toward her.

"Put out your pinkie," he said in a sappy tone of voice that he never used when he was giving me orders. "I'm going to make you a present of my lucky ring."

"You're going to give it to me?" she murmured as though she had heard something far too wonderful to believe.

"Of course I am," he said. "You ought to have it. Do you know," he cooed, "that there are times when I believe that you are nothing less than the reincarnation of some beautiful princess of Egypt. The moonlight of the Nile seems to shine in your eyes and—"

"Excuse me, folks," I interrupted, "but Hazleton just caught my eye. I guess he wants to tell me something. I'll be right back after I find out what he wants."

I knew that I would have to guffaw if I had to sit and listen to any more of the bunk that Ben was passing over to Sadie. So I hustled over to the table where Hazleton and MacDougall were sitting with Effie.

"He just gave her a ring," I said breathlessly.

"What!" exclaimed Effie. "An engagement ring?"

MacDougall pretended that he wasn't at all interested in the subject.

"No," I told her. "A ring with a stone bug in it—that fake scarab ring that he found."

"Oh," Effie said, as though she was somewhat disappointed.

"And he's telling her," I continued, "that she must be the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess, that he can see the Nile moonlight shining in her eyes."

"Moonlight!" sniffed Effie. "That's belladonna. What he don't know about make-up would convert a Swedish hired girl into an artist's model."

"Well, don't blame me," I began, "because I—"

I happened to glance over toward Ben and Sadie just as Ben raised his arm and crashed his fist down on the little table. The dishes jumped and rattled and made so much noise that every one in the place started up in alarm. But Ben, paying no attention to the others, beckoned wildly to me, and I trotted back to his table and sat down.

"I've got it!" he exploded, his face bulging red with excitement.

"What?" I asked. "Apoplexy?"

"I've thought of the way to put Sarah over," he continued, paying no attention to my crack. "I—we're—going to claim that she is the actual reincarnation of an Egyptian princess. I guess that won't appeal to the public, eh?"

Ben was full of enthusiasm, but Sadie, who didn't know what it was all about, sat there dumb with her mouth half open.

"I guess it won't," I told Ben, "but then, again, it might."

"It might," he exclaimed scornfully. "It will, you mean. I'll take the testimony of scientists and psychologists to prove our claim. I'll sell the idea to the public all right. Let's see," he mused, "we'll have to have a name for Sarah—a name that will sound sort of Egyptian. Let's see," he repeated, and then relapsed into silence. I made believe that I, too, was deep in thought.

"How about Olive Obelisk?" I asked him after awhile. "That suggests Egyptian atmosphere."

"Not at all," he said impatiently. "Not at all. It's—well, it just won't do. Don't

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bother thinking any more," he told me coldly, as if he thought I was hopeless. "I'll get what I'm after pretty soon."

So the three of us sat there as if we were at a séance waiting for the table to get up on its hind legs and strut across the room. Then Ben suddenly came to.

"I've got it!" he announced. "We'll bill Sarah as *Lotus Blossom,* the reincarnation of the Princess—let's see—the Princess—Azamaranth."

"Was there ever any such princess in Egypt?" I asked Ben.

"How do I know?" he replied. "There might have been. I don't know that there wasn't. Anyway, I like the name—it sounds authentic. And I like Lotus Blossom, don't you, Sarah?"

"Of course I do," she said. "I think it's wonderful. It's so—er—flowery."

IV.

So Sadie Bodkin became a thing of the past, and, like a grub being transformed into a butterfly, she became Lotus Blossom.

"Lotus Blossom," sniffed Effie Elkins, when she heard Sadie's nom de screen. "That's a hot one, that is."

But Lotus Blossom she was, according to the mandate of Mr. Hyman, and Lotus Blossom she remained.

She and Ben became more intimate than ever, and he spent most of his time worrying over the Egyptian story he was writing for her and doping out plans to publicize her when the moment arrived for her to make a shadowy bow to the great and palpitating public.

I had to do most of the work of our department, but Ben's earnest enthusiasm afforded me so much diversion that it made the routine drudgery easy. Merry Merriwell was inclined to be rather huffy most of the time because she thought that she was not getting enough publicity, but I managed to smooth her feathers every time they got ruffled.

There was no question about the fact that Sadie—I mean Lotus Blossom—was stealing the picture. She was young and good-looking and without artifice, while Merry, at twenty-six, was getting along in years.

Then "The Fatal Spell" was released, and it made a decided sensation in the motion picture world.

And while every one, from Johnson, the director, down to the postman who delivered mail at the studio, was claiming credit for the success of "The Fatal Spell," a sudden deluge of letters began to arrive for Lotus Blossom.

For Ben had started sort of an endless chain without consulting either Mr. Hyman or Mr. Klipstein. The stunt, indeed, was a secret between Ben and myself.

We had sent out two or three hundred letters at random, instructing the recipients to write to Lotus Blossom and tell her what they thought of her work in "The Fatal Spell." Upon the receipt of the letter they would receive a beautiful picture of Lotus Blossom, autographed by herself.

Those who took advantage of this offer also had the privilege of telling any seven of their friends to submit their impressions of the talent and beauty of Lotus Blossom and receive, in return, beautiful pictures of her in Egyptian costume. And each of the seven friends could, in turn, whisper the secret to seven of their friends, and so on *ad infinitum.*

When the letters started to pour in by the thousands, each one of them containing the most extravagant praise of Lotus Blossom, Ben went to Mr. Hyman with a smile on his face.

"Didn't I tell you so," he boasted. "The public is going crazy over our new star. She's the biggest find in the history of the industry."

"Yeah," agreed Mr. Hyman, "but what about all of these pictures of her we're sending out for nothing. They don't grow on trees, them pictures. They cost money, Bennie."

"Money!" exclaimed Ben. "Say, that is nothing. You'll get your money back a hundred times over. Don't fail me now, Mr. Hyman. You'll find out that I'm right if you will back me up a little while."

Mr. Hyman looked at him out of opaque eyes.

"All right, Bennie," he said. "Use

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your own judgment about it. Maybe it is that you are right."

More than a hundred thousand pictures of Lotus Blossom were mailed out and the campaign cost H. and K. something like ten thousand dollars.

It resulted in a lot of sensational publicity for the girl, however, and that was what Ben was after. On the back of each print there was a typewritten description of her.

She had been born in Egypt, it stated, and it was believed, for many convincing reasons, that she was the reincarnation of the Princess Azamaranth, a young and beautiful scion of the mighty rulers of the ancient empire by the Nile.

The campaign aroused a new and sudden interest in the theory of the transmigration of souls, and inasmuch as there was no particularly attractive murder or divorce cases before the public, the subject of reincarnation was seized upon by various magazines and newspapers and discussed in many articles.

One Sunday paper, in the magazine section, ran a two-page spread featuring Lotus Blossom.

It was profusely illustrated, and one picture purported to reveal her as she appeared on her throne back in the days of the Ptolemys. There she was, seated on a dais, the central figure in a scene of splendor, while two big Nubians were keeping her cool with long fans of ostrich feathers.

Then, in the same spread, there was a beautiful photograph of her in modern attire, and, thrown in for good measure, three or four scenes from "The Fatal Spell." If you could believe the sensational story that accompanied the pictures, there wasn't the slightest doubt but that Lotus Blossom, who was born in the shadow of the pyramids, was the reincarnation of the long-dead, once exquisitely beautiful Princess Azamaranth, daughter of the Ptolemys.

Mr. Hyman could not quite fathom the theory of transmigration, but he could understand the value of a two-page spread in a Sunday paper.

"H-m," he said when he looked the sheet over. "H-m-m-m."

It was then that Ben sprang on him the proposition of featuring Sadie—I mean Lotus Blossom—in a picture laid in old Egypt.

Ben had taken me into Mr. Hyman's office with him on this occasion, and my function there was to "yes" my immediate superior whenever such a procedure seemed to be judicious.

"I've got an idea, Mr. Hyman," Ben began, "that I know you're going to fall hard for. I've got more than an idea. I've got a story—a knock-out of a story—and I want you to let Lotus Blossom play the lead in it. She's already had a million dollars' worth of publicity, and the eyes of the public are just popping out looking for a picture featuring her."

"Well," began Mr. Hyman, "maybe—"

"Listen!" commanded Ben. "We've got every one believing that Lotus Blossom is the reincarnation of the Princess Azamaranth." He paused a moment. "Maybe she is, Mr. Hyman, maybe she is. Who can say that she isn't?"

Mr. Hyman looked impressed and blinked three or four times. It was apparent that he didn't care to state, for publication or otherwise, that she wasn't.

"Now, Mr. Hyman," continued Ben, "I've got a story outlined in which Lotus Blossom will play the rôle of the Princess Azamaranth. Do you get it, Mr. Hyman; do you get it?" If Mr. Hyman did, he didn't admit it. "And I've got a wow of a story, too, Mr. Hyman!" exclaimed Ben. "Don't overlook that! And it's a new type of story—just what the public wants."

Then he outlined the plot to Mr. Hyman, and the latter, as he heard the melodrama unfold, seemed to be rather impressed.

"But there's no chase in it at the end, Bennie," he complained. "A picture needs a chase in it at the end. You know that as well as I do."

Ben was nonplused for a moment, and I knew that he was casting around for some argument to advance to Mr. Hyman.

"You could have the high priest chase the heroine up the side of one of the pyramids," I suggested. "And then there could be a fight right on top, a fight in which the hero throws the high priest off the pyramid to a horrible death far, far below.

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"That's the stuff," said Mr. Hyman approvingly. "Could you get that in, Bennie?"

"Maybe," said Ben, looking at me with rather a cold eye. "What do *you* think of the whole proposition?" he then asked me directly.

"Yes," I said, remembering what I was there for.

Mr. Hyman tapped his desk with the end of a lead pencil for a moment.

"A production like that, Bennie," he finally sighed, "would make a big cost of money."

"Money!" said Ben. "Say, that's nothing! You'll get your money back a hundred times over!"

Mr. Hyman considered the matter for another moment.

"All right, Bennie," he said. "Use your own judgment about it. Maybe it is that you are right."

V.

I GUESS there must have been many times in the next three or four weeks when Mr. Hyman had his doubts as to whether or not Ben was right.

In the first place, he had to pay Lotus Blossom seven hundred and fifty dollars a week to hold her. This was an unheard-of salary in those days, but three or four rival producers, sensing the tremendous value of the publicity she was getting, kept raising the ante for her services, and Mr. Hyman was obliged to meet them.

In the next place, Merry Merriwell, who had been making money for H. and K., quit in high dudgeon because her stellar glow paled away into insignificance before that of Lotus Blossom. Mr. Hyman was a good sport, however, and he continued to back up Ben's estimation of the potential value of the new star.

After the appearance of the article in the Sunday paper the ferryboats to Fort Lee were thronged with nitwits who wanted to get a glimpse of the beautiful girl whose body was inhabited by the wandering soul of the Princess Azamaranth. Mobs of people, mostly women, milled in front of the studio all day.

But did they ever see the face of Lotus Blossom? Not if Ben knew his publicity, which he did. All they ever saw was the graceful and slender figure of a veiled girl who was attired in a rather picturesque and somewhat diaphanous costume.

And did any one in the curious crowds ever have the opportunity to touch as much as a hem of her garment? Not so that you could notice it.

When she arrived at the studio in her limousine she was escorted by two colored gentlemen who were at least six feet tall. They too were garbed in Egyptian costumes, and they functioned as the bodyguard of Lotus Blossom.

Ben had picked them up in Harlem, and he paid them each three dollars a day for their services. He wasted good money doing that. Each would have paid him six dollars a day for the privilege of basking in the glory which Lotus Blossom reflected on them. It wasn't every day in the week that a Harlem black boy could get a job as an honest-to-Gawd Nubian.

When Lotus Blossom was in the studio, and was not engaged on the set, she spent her time in her dressing room reading the fan mail that came to her and browsing over books about Egypt. Every nut, both east and west of the Mississippi River, must have written to Lotus Blossom to tell her how wonderful and beautiful she was, and there was never a doubt expressed in any of the communications as to the reality of her being the reincarnation of the Princess Azamaranth.

As time went by a subtle change became apparent in the girl. Her manner became decidedly aloof, she was rather inclined to be haughty, and she took a very imperious attitude toward us common plugs around the studio.

The title of the story which Ben had written for her caused some difficulty before the production got under way.

Ben wanted to call it "A Maid of Memphis," but Mr. Hyman objected to this because it might be misleading to people. They might think that it was the story of a hired girl in Memphis, Tennessee, which of course would create an entirely false impression.

And then, too, some fellow named Grif-

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fith was going to do a Southern story called "The Birth of a Nation," and Mr. Hyman didn't want his good production to be confused, by any possible chance, with some piece of punk. So Ben, after scratching his head industriously for a long while, changed the title to "A Nymph of the Nile."

Mr. Hyman was not particularly enthusiastic when he heard it, but it passed for a couple of days. At about that time I happened to drop into his office to ask his opinion, for publication, on some momentous matter.

I found him in an argument with his stenographer.

"Ha!" he said, looking at me. "Look, will you, how she spells nymph. She's got it down in a letter already spelled n-i-m-f. Ha, young lady," he said, turning to the girl, "don't be afraid to use letters. They don't cost nothing. Nymph is spelled n-i-m-p-f."

Even when Mr. Hyman finally did learn how the word was spelled it was very apparent that he did not like it.

"It don't mean anything," he objected. "I don't know what it means. If I didn't, who will? Huh?"

So Ben cast around some more, and finally hit on "The Shadow of the Pyramids," which was perfectly satisfactory to every one concerned.

I met Cassidy, the stage carpenter, when I walked in the studio one morning after the great production was under way.

"Well, I got it all fixed up," he announced agreeably.

"Fine, Cassidy!" I said enthusiastically. "Now if you'll tell me what you've got all fixed up I'll know all about it."

"Why, Lotus Blossom's apartment," he said, apparently surprised to find that I hadn't been able to read his mind.

"Lotus Blossom's apartment?" I repeated. "Has she got an apartment, then?" I added.

"Sure she's got an apartment," replied Cassidy. "Where do you think she's living—in a Bowery flophouse?"

"I hadn't been thinking about it," I apologized. "What has she got—two baths and a room?"

"Two baths and a room me eye!" exclaimed Cassidy. "She's got a room as big as a barn, with a balcony around it. Then there's three or four other rooms, too. I fixed up the big one, though, and believe me, it's some gorgeous. A big throne like at one end and—"

"A throne like!" I exclaimed. "What is that for?"

"To sit in, of course," replied Cassidy.

"To sit in?" I echoed. "What does she want to sit in a throne for? Did the old kitchen chair break a leg?"

"I don't know," Cassidy replied. "It's her idea, that's all. That girl's got ideas, I'll tell you."

"She's contracted them all of a sudden, then," I said.

"Well, wait and see," Cassidy told me. "She's gettin' ready to hold a reception, and we're all goin' to be invited."

"I'll accept with the greatest pleasure," I assured Cassidy; and then I went up to the sanctum, where I found Ben.

"What's all this I hear about Sadie's new apartment?" I asked him. "I mean the one with the throne in it?"

My curiosity seemed to be somewhat annoying to Ben.

"Who told you about it?" he asked irritably.

"I've forgotten," I answered. "Somebody was mentioning it, and I just happened to be listening in."

"Well, she has got a new place somewhere," he admitted. "A motion picture star, of course, can't live like a stenographer. I haven't seen her place yet, but she tells me that she's having it fixed up pretty decently."

"But what about the throne," I persisted. "Is it a two-seater, with room for your royal nibs on it, or does it only provide accommodations for one?"

"I don't know anything about it," he growled. "I haven't seen it yet any more than you have."

"Well, I guess we'll all get a look at it pretty soon," I told him. "I understand that the princess is going to throw a party and that all us vassals or tributaries or whatever she considers us are going to be invited."

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"I don't know anything about it," he reiterated rather sourly and I could feel that he was not in any mood to be kidded.

I knew that Ben was somewhat distracted because things were not going so smoothly between himself and Lotus Blossom. The developments of a few weeks had made a startling change in the erstwhile Sadie Bodkin.

She now glided around the studio with an imperious air, and it was very seldom that she deigned to speak to any one. She no longer had lunch with Ben; she ate alone in the privacy of her dressing room. She seemed to be moving on a higher plane, in a more ethereal atmosphere, than any of the rest of us.

Her bodyguard, at her insistence, had been increased to six gigantic negroes and her progress to work each morning resembled the parade of a minstrel show.

I happened to be loitering around the ante-room of the studio one afternoon when a swarthy fellow who wore long hair and a pair of blue goggles came into the place. He was followed by two other dark-complexioned foreigners who, between them, carried a long black box which they seemed to handle reverentially.

The leader of the queer appearing trio inquired, in broken English, for the Princess Azamaranth and added the information that the box was for her. Old man Kelly, who was guardian of the gate, gruffly demanded a card which the man in the blue glasses could not produce.

"Just inform 'er that Prince Seti Thomes awaits the pleasure of an audience with 'er highness," he told the yawping Kelly.

"Huh?" asked Kelly in amazement.

"I'll take the message back to her," I told Kelly. "I think I know what it is all about."

As a matter of fact, I didn't know anything about it at all, but I intended to find out what I could.

I went back to the stage and learned that Lotus Blossom was in her dressing room so I sought her out there. To my great surprise I found that two of her bodyguard were standing by the door.

I was about to knock for admission, but they blocked my way and one of them informed me that he would take any message for the princess.

"For two cents," I said, "I'd take a mallet and knock the blocks off of you big dinges. But, just to avoid trouble, I'll forego the pleasure. Tell Sadie Bodkin in there that there's three tough looking yeggs out here who want to see her and that one of them says he's Prince Seti Thomes."

With that I drifted away, wondering where and when the foolishness of Sadie Bodkin was going to stop. A minute later one of the black boys passed me on his way to the ante-room and shortly after that he came back escorting the three mysterious characters who had come to call on the Princess Azamaranth.

The man in the blue goggles was in the lead and the other two, carrying the box as though it was full of nitroglycerine, followed close behind. I wondered what it was all about and, lingering in the vicinity of the dressing rooms, I saw one of the black boys go out and find Cassidy and take him into the private room of the princess where the three strangers already had disappeared.

Cassidy was in there for several minutes and, when he came out, his eyes looked like big green gooseberries.

"She's got her husband in there!" he exclaimed in a voice that was quivering with awe.

"Who's the husband?" I asked. "'The guy in the blue goggles?"

"No," whispered Cassidy. "Her husband's in the box that they had me open. He's all dead and dried up. He looks like a—like a—Gawd!—he looks more like a baked monkey than he looks like a man. But she's in there talking to him just as if he was alive!"

I went up to tell Ben what was going on and try to get some clew to what it was all about.

"It's that damn mummy, I suppose," he groaned. "Some faker has got hold of her and has convinced her that he has the mummy of a man she loved 'way back in Egypt. She told me something about it this morning and said that she intended to buy it."

"Somebody is playing her for an easy

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mark," I protested. "You shouldn't let them get away with it, Ben."

"'What can I do?" he almost wailed. "Most of the time she won't even speak to me. She eyes me like something that ought to be looked at through a microscope."

"Why don't you tell her where she gets off at!" I exclaimed indignantly. "You don't have to stand for that sort of stuff."

"But I do—that's the trouble," he replied disconsolately. "I got Hyman into this production and it's already set him back between forty and fifty thousand dollars. If Lotus Blossom should quit for any reason, everything would go blooey. Even Hyman knows that he's got to stand for anything she wants to do until the picture is finished. He's a good sport, the old man is."

"'And he don't want to lose a small fortune, either," I added.

"If you ask me," Ben continued, becoming confidential for the first time in weeks, "I think that Lotus Blossom is just playing the game for publicity. I gave her the cue and she is following it up to the very limit. She is even trying to see if she can delude me into believing that she is the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess. She'll come up smiling some day and give us all the laugh."

"All the same," I told Ben, "I wouldn't let her get away with too much."

"What can I do?" he asked me somewhat desperately. "She's got those black birds eating out of her hand and she's even threatened, once or twice, to have a couple of them throw me out of the studio."

"The best thing that you can do is to stay out of the studio until the shooting of the picture is all over with," I suggested.

"She might not like that, either," moaned Ben, "and, if she didn't, I suppose that she'd have the African army grab me and throw me *into* the studio. I don't know what to do about it all."

"It 'll come out all right," I told him.

"I don't care how it comes out, as far as I'm personally concerned," he said. "I'm only anxious to see that damn picture finished. And yet," he continued, "I do care, too. If I was ever in love with a girl, it was with Sarah. And she seemed to like me, too. I can't make head or tail of the affair."

As the days went by the production of "The Shadow of the Pyramids" went on slowly but surely and Ben began to look quite hopeful despite the fact that Lotus Blossom was more and more aloof and regal in her attitude.

I was on the stage one day when I saw Cassidy beckoning mysteriously to me from behind a set which was about to be struck. I drifted over in his direction and he led me into a nook where no one could see us.

"I was over at the palace last night," he whispered to me.

I thought he meant the Palace Theater and wondered what all of the mystery was about.

"Well, how was the bill?" I asked.

"How did you know that she gave me a bill?" he queried. "She always gives me a twenty when I do any job for her and it's always all right as far as I know."

"Job for who?" I questioned. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Lotus Blossom," he replied. "I was over helping her fix up her palace last night."

"Her palace?" I echoed.

"Well," he said, "her apartment then. She calls it her palace, though."

"Oh," I said.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Cassidy. "It's some place! I don't like it very much, though," he added. "I don't feel very much at home in a palace."

"What!" I exclaimed. "You don't feel at home in a palace. I'm surprised at you, Cassidy!"

"I can't help it," replied Cassidy, "I don't. Not in that palace, anyway. Those six dinges and that guy with the blue goggles and his two friends gi'me the creeps."

"When is the big party coming off, Cassidy?" I asked him.

"The place is all set," he told me. "It won't be long now."

VI.

THE following day, Lotus Blossom arrived at the studio a couple of hours late, but she came riding in on a good excuse.

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She had, it seems, abandoned her car and had taken to a camel that she had managed to pick up in some menagerie or circus.

It was a double-humped model, equipped with all the latest accessories, and the crowd that followed her, as she came in sight of the studio, must have been half a mile long and just about the same width.

Mr. Hyman happened to be near the studio entrance when she arrived and he greeted her with a forced smile on his face.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, making a courtly bow. "The charming princess rides in state this morning."

I don't know where he picked up the line, but it must have been a subtitle in some picture he had seen.

"In the way that a princess of Egypt should ride," she told him slowly, as if she were speaking in a trance. "I know now that—" She didn't finish her sentence. Instead, she glided majestically past him, followed by her bodyguard, and went back to her dressing room.

Mr. Hyman watched her until she disappeared, then turned and whispered to me.

"Thank Gawd," he gasped, "that there ain't many more scenes to shoot! But I wish she was all of them and that we was using cannons instead of cameras."

There were several important episodes left to take, however, when the "commands" to attend the court of the Princess Azamaranth were distributed through the organization by the black attendants of her royal highness. The court was to be held in the evening of the day the invitations were handed out and Mr. Hyman made it plain that he wanted those who had been invited to the affair to attend it.

"If we can only keep her satisfied for maybe a week more," he said. "Ha! Then we'll show that there princess something!"

The four of us went together that night, Ben and I with MacDougall and Effie Elkins. We entered a lofty, dimly-lighted room which was crowded when we got there.

It was decorated with Egyptian motives and, at the far end of it, there was a great draped throne upon a dais. At the foot of the dais, and flanking each side of it, there were censers from which the aromatic smoke of incense was rising in vaporous clouds. Black attendants, male and female, clad in scanty attire were reclining around the ornate throne and grinning at the novelty of their jobs.

"It looks like a Harlem cabaret," sniffed Effie. "Where's Sadie, I wonder? When does the curtain go up on this show?"

For the throne, when we entered the room, was unoccupied and the Princess Azamaranth was nowhere visible. An orchestra was playing—and what an orchestra! The princess apparently had been unable to find any lute or rebek players listed in the musician's union and she had compromised by securing these saxophone tooters and three trap-drummers. The din they made was tremendous; it was almost impossible to hear anything but the cacophonic strains of the music.

Suddenly, however, the orchestra ceased playing and one of the black attendants sounded a couple of blue notes on an old cornet.

Then the curtains that were draped behind the throne slowly parted and the princess appeared with the man who wore the blue goggles. They ascended the throne and sat down on it together.

"Gosh!" exclaimed Effie. "There ain't no flies on them!"

And there weren't, either, because two black boys, one on each side of the throne, were keeping the air circulating around the royal domes by means of long ostrich feather fans.

"The whole thing looks like that picture in the Sunday supplement," said MacDougall.

"That's just where she got it all from," I told him.

Then a black attendant, standing near the foot of the throne, took to bellowing in a stentorian voice.

"Come fohwa'd, all o' yuh folks," he shouted, "an' make obeisance to th' Princess Azamaranth an' huh conso't, Prince Seti Thomes!"

"Sounds like a camp-meeting," sniffed Effiie. "Let's get up closer and take a look."

We did, just in time to see Cassidy amble up toward the throne in a friendly sort of way as though he expected to have a pleas-

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ant and informal chat with the royal couple. He was suddenly seized, however, by two big blacks who tipped him over, and laid him flat on his stomach and held him there.

"Make obeisance, Ah said," the official spokesman reiterated, "to th' Princess Azamaranth an' huh conso't, Prince Seti Thomes."

Cassidy remained right where they put him for a moment. Then he wriggled away and, red and perspiring, made his way back close to where we were standing. I heard him swearing volubly under his breath.

I saw the princess lean over and say a few words to the spokesman or herald or whatever the announcer in an Egyptian court was called and, as she was speaking to him, I heard the voice of Mr. Hyman.

"Ha!" he said to me. "I've seen enough of it. Right now I am going. What foolishness can all of this be anyway?"

But again the voice of the gigantic negro came rolling through the room.

"Isidore Hyman will now come fohwa'd an' pay obeisance to th' Princess Azamaranth an' huh conso't, Prince Seti Thomes."

"Hello, princess," said Mr. Hyman in a high and piping voice, at the same time waving a pudgy hand at her. "I'd come up, princess," he added, "only I got'a step along now. So long. I'll see you in the morning."

The princess leaned over and spoke to one of her bodyguard and immediately, four of the big attendants began to make their way through the crowd.

"Well, then, if you insist, princess," said Mr. Hyman moving forward until he stood in front of the dais. "This is is a nice place you've got, and it's a swell party that you're pulling."

"Make obeisance," boomed the announcer, "to th' Princess Azamaranth an' huh conso't, Prince Seti Thomes."

Then two of the giant blacks glided up to Mr. Hyman and, one on each side of him, they deftly prostrated him on the floor in a manner that was somewhat rough. They held him down there for an instant, then, lifting him up, tossed him onto his feet.

He backed away from the throne, making a series of low salaams as he retreated. Somewhere he had heard of the proper method of making a retreat from the presence of an Oriental potentate.

"Ha!" he whispered in my ear when he was back by my side. "Ha!" He appeared to be speechless with indignation.

Then, to my unbounded delight, Ben Milliken was summoned forward to make *his* bow before the throne. I thought he would refuse to go, but when his name was called he strode quickly up to the dais and stood there for a moment looking at the princess.

"Prostrate yourself, caitiff!" she finally told him insolently. "Prostrate yourself before the Princess Azamaranth."

"Listen, Sadie!" snapped Ben, "and get this straight! You've pulled too much of this bunk already! You're overdoing the stuff! It's about time—"

She turned languidly to one of her big attendants.

"Off with his head!" she ordered, indicating Ben, and the giant black started in his direction.

I then saw Ben in the grasp of four of the great negroes who were carrying him out of the room despite his violent struggles. I caught a glimpse of his face which, at this time, had sort of a dying-gladiator expression on it.

Then I saw his opponents throw open the door of the apartment—or palace—and thrust Ben out. Having rid the place of him, they made their way to the dais again.

"Well," I said to Effie Elkins, "I'm ready for anything now. If the princess wants me to do a few handsprings, believe me I'll turn 'em!"

"Gosh!" Effie exclaimed with a little note of awe in her voice. "Look at the way Sadie sits there. Do you know," she added, "*I think she really believes that she is the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess.*"

VII.

"It was an interesting case," said Dr. William Slavin, the eminent psychopathist, "but, except for its rapid advancement and the extremes to which it developed, not an unusual one."

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The day after the party, Ben had retained the services of the specialist and the latter, by making believe that he was an astrologer, had been able to observe Sadie Bodkin, alias Lotus Blossom, alias the Princess Azamaranth, while "The Shadow of the Pyramids" was being completed.

"Miss Bodkin," continued Dr. Slavin, "was a victim of self-hypnosis that was first induced by outside suggestion. From what I understand, the girl had very little education and she was entirely devoid of any reasoning power or mental stability. The first suggestion that ever made the slightest impression on her was the one to the effect that she was the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess.

"She held this in her mind, she thought of it day and night to the exclusion of everything else, until she became obsessed with the idea. Then she began to read books about ancient Egypt and she pored over them until she became saturated with the traditions of the country.

"But perhaps the most damning influence on her," continued the doctor, "was her reading of the thousands of letters which she received from the nitwits who saw her on the screen. The post office regulations ought to forbid the sending of letters of that type. They are written, in the first place, by mental incompetents and, in nine cases out of ten, they are received by people who lack sufficient intelligence entirely to disregard them.

"But to get back to Miss Bodkin," he added. "As I said before she was entirely lacking in reasoning power and, in this respect, was like any uneducated woman. The suggestion was made that she was the reincarnation of an Egyptian princess and it made a strong appeal to her. It must have been absurd to her at first, but there came a time when she wanted it to be true—and so she believed it."

"But I don't see why she beat it with that guy who wore the blue goggles," said Ben. "She had a good job and she would have become one of the biggest stars in the business."

"What's a good job to an Egyptian princess," laughed Dr. Slavin. "She's under the delusion, wherever she is, that that faker is the reincarnation of her ancient lover. That is all that her mind is capable of grasping at one time."

"But is there any cure for her condition?" asked Ben. "Will she ever come down to earth again?"

"Of course," asserted the psychopathist. "When her ego is punctured, the delusion that she is the Princess Azamaranth will pass out of her like air from a cut tire. When her money is gone, and the faker has wandered on his way, she will become Sadie Bodkin again."

He was silent for a moment.

"There's one odd feature of this case," he finally said. "I happen to be quite a student of Egyptology—it's been a fad with me. Do any of you gentlemen happen to know that there was a Princess Azamaranth in the court of one of the Ptolemy's?"

"I didn't know it," confessed Ben. "I just made the name up on the spur of the moment."

"Nevertheless," said the doctor, "there was. She was not, as a matter of fact, a princess of the blood, but she was raised to very high favor through the efforts of a court scribe who was in love with her. When she gained her dominance, however, she turned her back on the scribe and ran away with some other fellow. It has rather an amusing similarity to this case. One of the other scribes put the story down on papyrus; it is one of the first so-called human interest stories ever recorded."

"It may be similar in some ways," growled Ben, "but there's one similarity that the two cases will lack. The first story was recorded, but you can bet your life that this one never will be set down!"

And yet, here it is. Well, after all, who can tell anything about it? Maybe a soul doesn't travel on a one-way ticket and perhaps it can come back, when it feels the urge, to look over this vale of tears and mingle with the old folks at home.

Quien sabe? as the title writer makes the romantic lover remark, sooner or later, in every picture laid in Spain, Mexico or South America.

THE END

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Snowfall

By H. A. WOODBURY

THE snow started about dusk, at first to sift gently through the violet gloom of the pines and fall, melting, on the warm ground. Gradually, though, the wind shifted.

What had been but a timid freak of the weather became suddenly very much in earnest. It was a blizzard. The snow came in a whirling veil, sweeping down the mountainside to shroud the whole wide valley.

Ted Beach shifted his gaze from the window, now whitened beyond transparency. He gazed thoughtfully at his uncle.

In the yellow light of the oil lamp swinging on its chain overhead, the older man's face hardened into a mocking grin. Bill Beach's eyes grew every moment more and more brittly blue. His jaw, even in its smile, became more set.

"It's Providence, lad," he was saying, "Providence doin' to that sheep outfit what we'd of done if we was men any more."

Ted offered no comment. His tanned face grew thoughtful as he turned back to the window.

He swept a large hand slowly through his black hair. He was striving, somehow, to penetrate the whirling white veil outside to Buffalo Park, that clearing in the pines, where Jim Parker's sheep outfit was lambing.

Lambing on a night like this! And with the desert sweeps of their southern pastures only a week away. It was irony, grim and bitter.

He looked even farther into the whitish dusk—till he seemed to behold a face, softly beautiful and framed with a billowing luxuriance of chestnut hair.

It was a face that had haunted him for two days—ever since, when, riding across Government Prairie, the afternoon when the sheep outfit had come in, he had first seen the girl, sitting beside Parker on the jouncing box of a spring wagon.

He turned back to his uncle.

"Seems to me if we *really* were men, we'd go over and give 'em a hand. If they had enough help, they might save some of the lambs."

"Give 'em a hand!" The old man's voice mounted shrilly above the storm outside. "Give 'em a hand!" He burst into laughter.

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Ted came closer to hover over the box stove in whose depths the pine fagots snapped and crackled.

"After all," he went on evenly, "they've a right to be there."

His uncle's face crimsoned.

"Right," he snapped, "and who give 'em the right?"

"Why, the government, of course."

"An' what right's the government got to let 'em have a range here? We was here first." His voice became a roar. "Why, I kin remember when you rode them prairies an' the grass touched yer stirrups. You hobbled a hoss out at night, an' come mornin' he hadn't strayed fifteen yards. Now—" He broke off into a sharp laugh. "Show me where you'll find any grass taller'n a couple o' inches. Show me where you'll find any grass at all. And what done it? What done it? Bringin' sheep into this country."

The old man grinned. "Well, I done my part once." His lips tightened.

He referred now—and it was as much as he ever did refer—to his part in the days of that epic of Pleasant Valley, the Graham-Tewksbury sheep war.

Ted nodded. After a struggle as bitter as that feud had been, it is not easy for a man to forget or forgive.

"I suppose you've got to go on hatin' sheep men as long as you live. It's your nature and you can't help it. As for me—" He drew his words out in a thoughtful drawl, "I met the sons of some good ones down at the U. Played damn clean football with me. And just now, I'm goin' out an' saddle up Bets."

Bill Beach drew himself up, his face glowing till an old scar of the feud days gleamed white.

"Not while you're workin' for me, you ain't. I know Jim Parker an' they ain't no lower skunk. Knife you in the back, he would."

Ted forced a smile.

"I'll do as I please. Don't forget I own a little interest here, myself."

"I'll buy it out before I'll let you go."

Ted shook his head.

"We'll talk about it in the morning when you've cooled off."

"I'll disinherit you!"

Quietly ignoring this threat, Ted strove to brush past, but his uncle halted him. The older man's hand descended heavily on his nephew's shoulder.

For the moment, the two men stood facing each other. Ted's brown eyes did not waver.

"I'm going," he said.

"Not if I've got to lay you out to keep you here."

Through the yellow shadows, Ted saw the blow start. But it never arrived.

With a quick movement of his foot, Ted threw the heavier man off balance. And as he vanished into the swirling blizzard, he saw his uncle sitting upright, rather jarred and very much dazed in the middle of the cabin floor.

Silently he groped his way out to the corrals. In her covered stall in the little lean-to, he heard Bets whinny.

"It's a tough night, all right, old girl," he agreed with her.

He saddled slowly with icy fingers.

Then, with a very thoughtful heart, he set out blindly to find his way by instinct through the storm.

II.

All night long Ted toiled with Parker's men in the feverish and futile battle against the anger of nature grown whimsical.

Then, toward morning, when the first streaks of dawn came tumbling down the mountainside, they paused momentarily.

Parker smiled at them, his face pale as the prairie.

"Better have some hot coffee, boys."

He took Ted's hand warmly.

"You're from the T Bar, ain't you? You don't know how I appreciate this. Never been any too friendly with your outfit, you know. It was a war to the death in the old days, an' it's hard to get out o' that way of thinkin'."

He broke off to sigh.

"Reckon our work's mostly useless here, to-night. All I care now's just so's I save the ewes."

Ted nodded. "Better luck another year."

And he wondered, suddenly, how many times he had said or thought those words.

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"Better luck another year!" They were, somehow, the philosophy of the West from cactus to pine—from dry farmer to prospector.

He emerged from his mood abruptly.

"An' this is my daughter, Janet," Parker was saying.

Ted found himself confronted, face to face, with the vision of two days before.

Involuntarily, two bright dabs of color leaped to his cheeks.

"I—I—" he managed to stammer.

The girl smiled at his discomfiture.

"Wasn't it you," she asked, "who was riding that black mare, the other day?" And then, suddenly, she, too, flushed.

"Reckon so."

Ted had recovered himself sufficiently to look her in the face without blushing. She was, like himself, tanned from the mountain winds, and her eyes were fresh with the loveliness of purple asters.

"An' I rode near enough to your outfit to want to ride still nearer." He laughed. "Had a little argument gettin' away to-night. Uncle Bill's sorta peculiar about sheep men. But here I am."

He drew himself up jauntily in added emphasis.

"Nothing serious?" The girl's violet eyes became solicitous.

He grinned. "Nothin' but a little family brawl."

He returned to his task with a lighter heart. The snow still clung to the ground, but the storm had passed. It was possible now to keep the huge bonfires burning.

But his return to duty was brief.

It was perhaps half an hour later when the sound of approaching hoofs forced him to look up. Through the gray morning, there came riding toward him, Janet Parker at a full lope.

And he saw that she led beside her, his black mare, Bets, fully saddled.

She dismounted breathlessly.

"Quick," she commanded, "you'll have time to make Granite Cañon."

Ted stared at her blankly.

"And why on earth—"

She did not wait for him to go on. "They're after you with a warrant. They say—oh, never mind. Just hurry!"

"A warrant for what?" he asked evenly.

"For murder!"

The words stabbed like a knife. For the moment, Ted found no voice. His heart rose, choking to his throat, then sank into the very earth which seemed to open before him. His head reeled.

"You mean that I—"

"They found your uncle with a gash in the back of his head, this morning. And some of your men said you'd had a quarrel and that you'd knocked him down last night."

Ted gulped. Then faintly, he strove to smile.

"Thanks for warnin' me," he said, "but I guess if that's the case, I better wait and see it out."

"You—you mean you did it!" Janet's face grew suddenly as white as the mantle of snow which drifted over the mountainside.

"I—well—I didn't think he went down that hard. He was set against my comin' over here, you know, an' I just meant to push him to one side."

For a second, Janet did not answer. Then once more she held out the reins to him.

"Please—please hurry!"

He shook his head resolutely.

Her face flushed. "But there's a mob with a rope after you. They—they say—" She took a step nearer. "Please, Ted—hide for just a couple of days—just till I can talk reason to them. It's suicide to surrender, now."

Back through the pines, he heard the thundering of hoofs.

"You can make Granite Cañon, and I'll bring you supplies, to-night," the girl went on. "I'll tell 'em you beat it toward Sycamore."

The roar of hoofs came nearer. He heard shouts now.

"Ted, for God's sake— If you don't, I'll never as long as I live be able to think I didn't kill you."

Her eyes overflowed with tears.

He took her hand in his own and found it trembling.

"Promise me," he said, "you'll bring the sheriff to-morrow."

"I—I promise." Her voice choked.

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Then, with a final squeeze of her hand, Ted flung himself into the saddle. In a second, Bets was off, leaping fallen logs and malpai bowlders till they gained the forest's edge, then dashing down an aisle of pines where the needles stung his face as he passed.

By the time he gained Granite Cañon, the sun was fairly well up. Bets picked her way cautiously over the tumbled rocks on the floor of the box.

Presently, though, the going became so rough that Ted dismounted. He patted the loyal filly's neck tenderly as he picked a trail for the two of them.

He found, at length, a place which suited him; sheltered up and down the cañon by enormous pink granite bowlders intergrown with manzanita and screened overhead by the thick branches of two giant sycamores.

So, here, he prepared to wait. It was warmer than it had been during the blizzard, but far from comfortable Everywhere, now, the snow began to turn to damp, icy slush. But a fire was unthinkable with a posse in pursuit.

And suddenly it seemed to Ted, once more, that he should have given himself up—rope or no rope. Did it matter?

He set his teeth. Janet's tear-streaked face floated before him. "If you give yourself up, I'll think I've killed you."

He strove not to think—to put the whole terrible nightmare out of his head.

Yet eternally, he saw his uncle again, sitting on the floor, jarred and dazed.

III.

JANET came to him at twilight with food which she had packed in her saddle bags after wrapping it several times in newspapers in an effort to keep it warm. She brought blankets also, and an improvised feed bag made of gunny sacking, full of barley, for Bets.

"Why was it," she asked, "that you wanted so very much to leave against your uncle's wishes? Wouldn't it have been better to stay?"

Ted looked down.

"I came chiefly because I knew what the loss of those lambs was going to mean to you. You see, two days ago—" His eyes met hers for a second. "I can't tell you, though—now that everything's so changed."

She came closer, very tantalizing in her leather riding skirt.

"What, Ted?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, Janet." He turned half away.

She reached suddenly for his hand.

"Oh, Ted, they'll turn you free; I know they will. You didn't mean to do it."

"I know—" He spoke very slowly. "But I did do it. So I'm afraid it's manslaughter, anyway, Janet." He faced her smiling. "Remember your promise when you come, tomorrow. You're going to bring the sheriff."

All through the long night, he could not sleep. As the black hours dragged by, one by one, thoughts surged through his mind in a never-ending procession. And once, toward dawn, he had the panicky sensation that he must mount Bets and be off—anywhere—be free. He felt already the chill of steel and stone about him.

But these thoughts, persuasive as they were, were transient. He rolled a cigarette—and then another. And presently, his mind grew calm. Let the chips fall where they would, he was ready to see it out—anxious, even, now.

So that when he finally heard the sound of scrambling hoofs on the rocks down the cañon, he was ready to welcome his visitors, Janet and the sheriff.

He strode boldly forward.

But as the sound came nearer, his ear distinguished only one horse. He drew back cautiously into the shelter of a bowlder, all his preservative instinct once more aroused.

Suppose that it were some member of the posse with his mind made up to shoot first and inquire afterward? For Ted now realized that his disappearance would be sufficient alibi for quick work on the trigger.

He had, by his own act, made himself a dangerous man in the eyes of the law, a man not to be trifled with.

The sound of hoofs came nearer. He peered cautiously from the sheltering brush. And then he heaved a sigh of relief.

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It was Janet, after all. It must be that the sheriff was following.

He greeted her cordially, mercifully thankful to talk to some one again after the long hours.

"But where's the sheriff?" he demanded.

Janet stared at him with serious eyes.

"He wouldn't come."

Ted's brow contracted into a perplexed frown.

"You mean they don't want me, after all?" His heart beat suddenly faster.

But his incipient smile died on his lips. He saw suddenly that Janet was pale as death. Her eyes half closed, and she wavered.

He was at her side in an instant, his arm about her.

But she did not faint. With an effort, she controlled herself.

She smiled wanly. "They've arrested dad, instead," she said.

"Your father! Why, good Lord!"

Janet gave him no time to expostulate.

"You see, they've had time to look around a little better, and they found out that your uncle's wound couldn't have been caused by a fall, after all. He was clubbed over the head with something. Well, the witness to your altercation said you left just as soon as you knocked your uncle down. So that lets you out. And it seems they found an iron bar covered with blood buried rather near our camp."

Ted's heart now beat too dizzily to answer at once. Events had suddenly got beyond him. He had no time, even, to feel elated over the fact that his fracas had not caused his uncle's death.

"I see," he said finally, "but, Janet, any of us can swear that your father was with the lambing."

Janet shook her head.

"Did any of us see him every minute of the time?"

"And as far as the bar goes," Ted went on, "I might have buried it myself."

"But you didn't."

"Still, I might have."

Janet's voice faltered. "You see, it seems dad was very outspoken the day before yesterday about all the things he'd like to do to your uncle."

"I know," Ted agreed, "but that doesn't prove anything. My uncle's been just as outspoken about your dad."

"Which just makes it worse. People have been expecting a fight, there, for forty years."

Ted gazed meditatively up at the sky for a space. The gray of yesterday's clouds had vanished, and the heavens once more drifted in a bright turquoise blue.

He turned to Janet resolutely.

"Janet, we've got to get back to town as fast as we can ride."

The girl seemed to read some of the determination in his voice.

"Ted, tell me, what are you going to do?"

He smiled at her.

"Never mind. I'm just going to think for the time being. You know there's a remote possibility that I did bury that bar!"

Janet's face went white a second, then all the color came back in a crimson flood.

"But I know you didn't."

"And likewise, you know your father didn't. But as you just said, you don't know all the actions of either one of us. And neither does any one else."

He smiled.

"I can show them, perhaps, that on the basis of the evidence they have, there are two men, either one of whom *might* be guilty. That ought to make them think pretty seriously before they do anything to either one of those men, don't you think?"

They had come now to where the cañon began to widen out a little. Its box properties gave way to walls which came down with a more gradual slope.

Ted spoke but little. For as they rode along, he found his thoughts suddenly becoming as turbulent as ever.

Suppose Parker were guilty? It was all reasonable enough. Or if not Parker, himself, then one of his men, commissioned by him?

Naturally, Janet believed him innocent. But, could he, judging more impartially, be quite so sure?

Ted made up his mind to one thing. Whatever the outcome, it would make no difference in his feelings toward Janet.

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Would not the shadow of one man's guilt and another man's death always come as a black barrier between them? Could they —could they rise above it?

For he realized that she must always believe her father innocent. Therefore, would she not, if it came to a choice, undoubtedly be happier with her father than with him? For she had had her father always. And she had known him—no matter how long it seemed—only a little more than twenty-four hours.

The girl likewise rode in thoughtful silence.

And to Ted it seemed that her mind must be going over the same thoughts which perplexed his. She had scoffed at the idea of his burying the bar, a moment ago. But would she, as time went on, when she must consider two men, and place the guilt on one or the other?

He bit his lip. Just now, in the generosity of her youthful spirit, she had no wish to think he had done more than cause his uncle's fall. But she wished to think this only when she could think at the same time that her father was guiltless.

He stole a glance at her out of the corner of his eye. In the fresh breeze of the draw, her chestnut hair waved lightly under her sombrero over a meditative forehead.

His hand reached over suddenly to touch hers.

She smiled, her eyes once more fresh as mountain asters.

"Ted," she said, "I believe in my dad —and I believe in you."

He smiled back.

"I believe in your dad, too."

And in this moment, he spoke honestly. For it seemed to him that there was something in the girl's bright faith which admitted of no doubt.

Even so, he asked himself the same question.

"What if there must be a choice between us—a choice not determined by any of us, but by the law?"

And once more it seemed to him that to that question there was but one answer.

He rolled another cigarette to quiet his nerves.

The solution returned again and again.

And each time it seemed easier—more natural.

IV.

A SPATTERING of bullets which echoed and reëchoed in the tiny cañon startled him from his reverie. He beheld suddenly, just down the cañon, a detachment of the posse headed by one of his own men, Juan Passos—men who had been riding since the day before and who had had no opportunity of learning that the sheriff's headquarters had transferred suspicion to Parker.

Most of the group were, as a matter of fact, his own men. And hence, most of them were all the more bitter against him. For to them his quarrel with his uncle—when you considered its cause—was sedition of the worst type. He was a traitor to every died-in-the-wool cow man of the old order.

Hard, lean-faced men, they were—every one armed, and every one riding to shoot.

Even so, they put up their guns on sight of the girl—not without a little disappointment, thought Ted.

Passos ordered his men to search the prisoner. And then, as additional precaution, he had them bind his hands.

The girl they searched with more deference—with manifold apologies, in fact. It was not, as Passos explained, that they expected a lady to do any shooting—but they were taking no chances. Her little hunting knife, they permitted her to keep.

Ted smiled.

"We were just on our way to the sheriff's office, so you really needn't go to all this trouble," he said.

Yet at the same time he felt a little glad, now. This delegation would serve as a protection in case they ran across any more fragments of the posse, uninformed as to developments.

They emerged from the cañon presently into the pines and oaks, then out into the wide mountain meadow, and finally into the pines again.

For the ride was a long one. And to Ted, forced to sit as he was, it was far from comfortable. His shoulders ached, and he felt that red-hot needles had been rammed into his spine.

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He smiled bravely at Janet, and she returned his smile.

"I'm not afraid," she said.

He nodded, his face quietly thoughtful.

"Everything's going to come out all right, I know."

It was twilight when the cavalcade drew up before the jail.

Passos was the first to dismount. He advanced toward the sheriff with a swagger of pride, his swarthy face gleaming.

"Well, señor, just as I say, I get my man."

The sheriff dissolved into jovial mirth. His blue eyes twinkled. "The joke's on you, Juan," he said, "*we* got the man."

The shadow of a frown flitted across Juan's face.

"But," he protested, "I tell you—"

"I know," agreed the sheriff, "you said you saw Ted knock his uncle down, but the old man must 'a' got up again."

By now, Ted had swung off Bets.

He cleared his throat. "I don't think, sheriff, my uncle ever did get up again. You see—"

"Sure," Juan caught him up excitedly, "I go in afterward. He just lay there—"

The sheriff's blue eyes narrowed. He fixed them suddenly on Juan.

"You say you saw Ted knock his uncle down?"

"I watch through window."

"And you can swear that he died from the fall."

"He bump his head—hard—like that." Juan illustrated.

"He never moved again?"

"Never—"

"Then—" The sheriff drew a step nearer. "How do you account for the fact that further examination has shown that his wound couldn't have been caused by a fall—no matter how severe? That he was hit by something blunt? And that we've found a bloody piece of iron?"

Juan wavered uncertainly.

"Well—I—maybe I forget he use a piece of iron. Sure, I forget."

"Rather a queer thing to forget," commented the sheriff.

"Juan," demanded Ted suddenly, "isn't it a fact that my uncle loaned you a thousand dollars to buy calves—and that you lost it, gambling? You were by your own admission around the cabin after I left. Why isn't it logical that *you* killed my uncle and tried to use my quarrel with him as an alibi?"

"You lie—"

Juan leaped back, whipping out his forty-five.

There was a roar as two guns suddenly exchanged greetings.

Juan's gun spoke first, and one of the cowboys of the erstwhile posse staggered limply up against the side of the building.

Juan had beaten them all to the draw.

"I guess maybe," he observed, "I better ask Señor Beach to come a little way with me. Then, maybe, you be 'fraid to shoot."

He motioned Ted brusquely with his forty-five.

Ted stepped slowly forward.

But as he did so, he sensed the warm pressure of Janet's body behind him. And on his wrists he felt the scratch of her hunting knife as she slit the cords which bound him.

He advanced, his arms still crossed behind him, but now free.

Juan was surveying the circle, smiling.

"Promise me," he leered, "you gonna be careful not shoot much when we go, or maybe Señor Beach get hurt.

His watchful eyes wandered.

But Ted's eyes were riveted on Juan.

With a leap he caught the half-breed below the knees in a flying football tackle.

And in a second, they were rolling head over heels in the dust.

Suddenly, there was a shot.

Then out of the dust, emerged Ted, grimed and dirty.

"Thanks, old man. Your shot came just in time."

But Janet fell into his arms, trembling.

"Oh—I—I thought it was Juan shooting you."

The sheriff eyed them meditatively.

"You know," he interrupted them finally, "besides bein' sheriff an' a damn good shot, I got a brother that's justice o' the peace."

THE END

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THE READER'S VIEWPOINT

BELOW we print two letters, each from an old-time reader. For J. L. S.'s information, ARGOSY began as *The Golden Argosy*, large size, eight-page weekly, selling for five cents. No. 1 was dated December 9, 1882. It became a monthly in April, 1894, and a weekly again in October, 1917. M. L. B. is right with regard to *The All-Story*, which started as a monthly in January, 1905, became a weekly March 7, 1914, and was merged with ARGOSY, July 24, 1920.

CHRISTIANA, PA.

Inclosed find check for a renewal of my subscription for another year. This makes it quite a long time that I have read your magazine—clear back to the age of *The Golden Argosy* when you published it in a paper form, and I have enjoyed each number from that time to now; the only stories that I can remember that I did not like were those dealing with the fourth dimension, but I think I have missed as small amount of reading all of each number as any other subscriber. I don't see many letters from persons that can date back as far as I do. I can truthfully say that I have, to the best of my knowledge, not missed a number since your magazine was a five-cent paper. It has been so long I cannot remember just how often you issued it at that time or the price, but I think it was weekly. Will you tell me about this and if *Golden Argosy* was the first name of your publication.

Would like to see a letter from some other one of your readers that has read it continuously as long as I have.

Yours for a continuance of the magazine as you have it now; it cannot be beat. J. L. S.

VERO BEACH, FLA.

I believe I can qualify as one of the old-timers.

In 1904 at Christmas twenty-three years ago, I bought a copy of the first issue of *All-Story*. I can remember the picture on the cover. A circus hoop, paper covered, with the words "Something New" breaking through the paper, instead of the usual clown.

The first story was a serial, "When Time Slipped a Cog," by W. Bert Foster.

This was the most interesting serial I have ever read, and I have read many. For keeping the readers interested and in suspense until the very last, I can compare it only with Mark Twain's.

How many other readers have you who have read it since its first issue, dated January, 1905?

I don't see how you could improve the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY except by making it bigger or issuing it oftener. M. L. B.

NEW YORK CITY.

As a constant reader of the ARGOSY, may I congratulate you on your very interesting magazine with its stories of varied backgrounds. And specially I wish to express my admiration for Hulbert Footner and his brilliant serial, "Queen of Clubs," and the *very honest* purpose he shows in his expert titling of the story and *specially* the magnificent ending. How right and sincere that ending was, and what courage the author showed in avoiding all hokum and cheap sentimentality and in showing just the right amount of ambition and sincere purpose that had developed in the character of *Len Farley* through his great love for *Carola!* A. B. S.

SALEM, MASS.

When Mr. Worts's first installment of "The Return of George Washington" came out I thought it one of the most marvelous stories I'd read in many moons, and I wrote in to you in that tone, but as the further installments came out and the pseudo Washington was made out such an utter ass, from admiration to disgust was but a step, and the end of the story was an awful "flop"—as so many of Mr. Worts's stories end.

As Loring Brent, he writes *interestingly* and as in the case of "The Bully of Biscayne Bay," without the *striving for effect* and efforts to be cynically funny as in some of his other attempts.

My sincere advice to him is to continue the Loring Brent stories, and go lightly on the other sort.

Fred MacIsaac is my idea of a writer who is "there." Since his days as theatrical critic on our Boston papers, he has never been anything but "top notch" in every way. His stories are gems. MRS. C. Y. H.

SAN FERNANDO, CAL.

Being a constant reader of your ARGOSY-ALLSTORY for the past ten years I believe "The Return of George Washington" is the best serial you have published yet. I thought at first, before I had finished it, that it was certainly fantastic and rather vague—but toward the climax it turned out to be the most original and thrilling plot I ever read. Nowadays an original story is surely appreciated by one like myself who reads lots. And as for your magazine, as a whole, it can't be beat in my estimation. Especially with authors such as Mr. Worts, Fred MacIsaac, and Mr. Merritt. R. J. P.

PERRONVILLE, MICH.

Inclosed find four dollars for a year's subscription to ARGOSY-ALLSTORY magazine. I have found it the best magazine on the market to-day. The best story I have read recently is "The Return of George Washington." It had a rather un-

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satisfactory ending, however. Hulbert Footner's "Queen of Clubs" is an interesting story. My favorite authors are John Hopper and Beatrice A. Vandegrift. E. V.

MONTGOMERY, ALA.

I would like to inform you of the fact that you have secured another ARGOSY fan. The first number I bought was the one beginning "King's Khaki." I have been reading it ever since, and I am here to tell you that it is one fine magazine. And "The Return of George Washington"—oh, boy, words fail me when it comes to expressing my pleasure in that story! H. G.

DES MOINES, IOWA.

I am not an old reader as far as my age goes, but in the years that I have read your magazine I *am* an old reader, having read it since I was ten years old. In all that time I do not think I have ever spent a dime that I did not get my money's worth. "A Blaze of Glory" is the best story I have ever read in any magazine. Whatever became of the little publicity man who was trying to put the singer over? Let's hear from him. R. B.

LOS ANGELES, CAL.

Inclosed find check for four dollars. You know what for! And while I am at it may I say a few words about your magazine?

Every story, serial and novel is a wow. "The Return of George Washington," by Worts, and "The Sun Test," by Barry, are the best stories I have ever read. I enjoyed "Seven Footprints to Satan" very much. I like all your authors, especially F. MacIsaac, C. C. Waddell, R. Barry, and G. Worts. I do not care so much about the railroad stories, but as you can't please every one, I will not kick. A. K.

MILFORD, CONN.

I don't like the way E. M. in the November 12 issue criticized your reader who said no more war stories. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we can't all be "hard boiled." Neither are we "old women." The finest, bravest and red-bloodedest man I ever had the honor of knowing saw active service on the battle front and yet never speaks of his experiences or wishes to recall them in any way.

Do not care for your impossible stories at all, although "Seven Footprints to Satan" was an exception. "Moonglow" was the best story I have read in years and have been anxiously awaiting the one similar to it that you promised us some time ago. C. F. Coe is a wow. "Tickets to Paradise" was fine. All of Johnson's stories are great; you can't give us too many. Please tell your critics who say, Let them buy a Western magazine if they want Westerns, that you can't get ARGOSY kind in *any* other magazine. So please continue with them. Glad to see Mme. Storey is coming back; was afraid she died a horrible death. Can't we have a Mme. Storey serial? "The Ramblin' Kid" was a masterpiece. Can't we have more like it? The ARGOSY leads them all, and always will as far as I'm concerned.

M. K. C.

LEEDS, S. C.

I want to thank E. F., from Greensboro, N. C., for calling my attention to Earl Wayland Bowman's short story, "As Told by the Ramblin' Kid," in the October 1 ARGOSY. It was a splendid little story as well as poetry. I think "The Ramblin' Kid" was one of the best stories ever published. Hope E. W. Bowman writes us a serial now. I see some of the kickers are trying to howl the war stories down as they did the Western stories, but hope they don't succeed this time. "The Return of George Washington" certainly is a remarkable story, and I won't make any wild guesses, but am waiting anxiously for the concluding number. "Queen of Clubs" is fine so far. My favorite authors are Max Brand, Charles A. Seltzer, Fred MacIsaac, and Earl W. Bowman. "Desperate Chances" was great. "Tickets to Paradise" was also fine.

Hope the Reader's Viewpoint grows larger as it can't be any better. G. J. B.

EAST QUOGUE, L. I., N. Y.

Inclosed find my subscription. "Return of George Washington" was about the best ever. Some imagination! Just the thing I like best! Compliments to Mr. Worts. He ought to get a raise for that. No criticism. You know what you are about. Keep it up. L. S.

HOLLYWOOD, CAL.

For several years I have read ARGOSY, and so have my husband and friends, and on the whole we find it most entertaining. Some of us do not care so much for the Westerns, but personally, I like them if they are not too frequent.

What I particularly wanted to write to you about at this time, however, is to express my appreciation of a recently published story by Eric Howard, "For Fifty Thousand Dollars." It is one of the most human tales I have read in many a day. We all like Mr. Howard's stories because they are always human and interesting, frequently amusing, and they always stand out as examples of good writing and fine English. You can't have too many of them.

From this you will gather that ARGOSY is pretty popular in one corner of Hollywood, anyway!

B. W.

The thirteenth successful guess as to the authorship of "Eyes West!" out of two hundred and forty-three submitted to date—December 20—was made by Herbert Rosenberg, of Memphis, Tennessee. The writer of this much-discussed story has just finished a new serial, which we hope to start in the near future.

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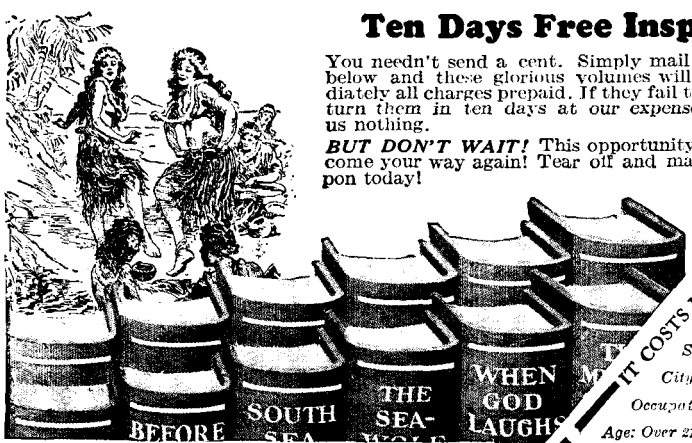

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